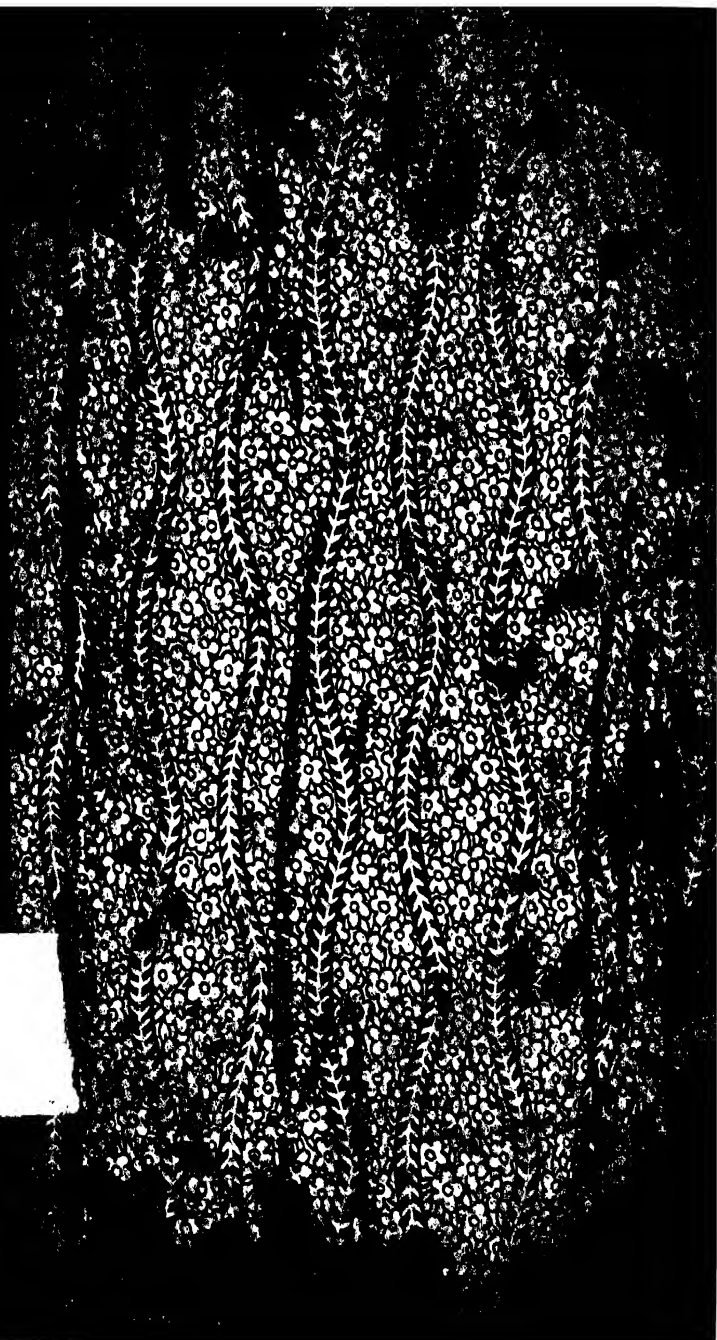


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# SHAW'S CORNER



STEPHEN WINSTEN

SHAW'S  
CORNER.

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*To  
Clare*

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## FOREWORD

IT was not until I had written the last word in this book that I felt G.B.S. was dead. Whilst I was writing his presence was ever there, leaning over my shoulders, joking, castigating, correcting, but now it is silent.

Very many months passed before Clare and I could bring ourselves to revisit Shaw's Corner. We understood what Richard Jefferies meant when he left his old village 'unrevisited', when he said: 'I planted myself everywhere, under the trees, in the fields and footpaths . . . and have not gone back thither lest I find the trees look small and the elms mere switches, and the fields shrunk, and the brooks dry and no voices anywhere; nothing but my own ghost to meet me by every hedge.' One day Clare felt a real call to go to Ayot Saint Lawrence; she woke up with the conviction that she was needed there.

Ayot Saint Lawrence had been put 'on the map' at last. Instead of the innocent signpost pointing the way to the sleepest of all villages, there were now garish signs everywhere insistently pointing the way to Shaw's Corner, the focus of pilgrim and tourist. A conspicuous notice outside the house coldly stated the admission fee and hours for visiting. A haystack was on fire within a few yards of the wooden shelter where G.B.S. had worked. The hut, shuttered and forlorn, seemed destined for the flames. A few junior villagers stood watching the firemen playing the hose on the leaping fire and we stood transfixed, almost expecting the laughing figure of G.B.S. to emerge. A native insisted on telling us all the news since we were last there and suddenly exclaimed: "He's at it again. We've never had a moment's peace since he is gone. The cars, and the crowds and the mud!"

It was not the official visiting day but Mrs. Laden, who was acting warden, did everything to make us feel at home again. But how could we feel at home when all the rooms were barren of his presence? Death had turned him into the legendary figure

he had persistently and obstinately built up and no legendary figure could be native in such a place.

We were informed that St. Joan had been saved in the nick of time: the tree trunk on which she stood had turned to dust and she might have fallen down the bank and on to the ashes of Shaw and his wife. The statue had been moved back until the National Trust saw its way to replace it in the original position. We found her enveloped in a pall of smoke which cleared while we stood there.

Once we had laughingly talked of Shakespeare visiting this village and finding it practically unchanged from his own Tudor days, and as we walked through the village once more, we felt transported to five hundred years hence with G.B.S. coming round the corner and ignoring the place where Shaw's Corner had stood, seeking the plentiful trees and not finding them.

Well, what would I have done with Shaw's Corner? He walked and he talked, he worked and he slept, and he died there.

I wrote this book to restore the magic of personal contact. I tried to give G.B.S. as I knew him at every level. Even in old age a man retains his past and is only conscious of age at moments: his childhood and his youth are as urgent in him as ever. If he sees the past with the eyes of old age he also sees old age with the eyes of youth. On the last walk we had together he said: "Narrow is the lane, and straight is the gate and few there be who find it. I can already see huge crowds queuing up with their shillings and waiting for the word 'go!' It wasn't long ago when, on Palm Sunday I led the people through Clare's gate into the House of God. I seemed on that day to be exchanging winks with Him." Then he put a question to me; the identical question he had put to Tolstoy forty years back:

"Suppose the world were one of God's jokes, would you work any the less to make it a good joke instead of a bad one?" His life in all its manifestations was his answer to this question.

Let it be understood that I did not walk about pencil in hand and with a questionnaire, nor had I any mechanical contrivance for recording our conversations, as some have suggested, nor can



I lay claim to an exceptional memory. I was helped, it is true, by the fact that G.B.S. always enjoyed quoting himself, but how differently it sounded and how significant those words became when they had this special relationship to his own life or to the immediate problem. He had often remarked that he had touched the hidden springs of his being through us. This was, of course, a gross exaggeration but I feel that he did reveal more of himself in the quiet of Ayot Saint Lawrence than he did in his books. If at moments I seem to throw modesty and discretion to the winds, I can only mix my metaphors and answer that otherwise there was a real danger of emptying G.B.S. with the bath. I put the point to him and he wrote a characteristic answer:

"I rather agree; but the vulgar world expects us to vie with one another in mock modesty (which I abhor) and reciprocal back scratching (which you abhor). I must echo Drinkwater in Brassbound: 'Be modest on your own account, not on mine'." It was easy for me to be modest on my own account but I found it impossible to attain even a semblance of reality without telling everything on his account. If I have made him spring to life, free of mask and counterfeit, then I may be forgiven. My inadequacy for this task will not be overlooked, precision and integrity are not enough. I have tried to the best of my ability to share a unique experience with you.

*Oxford,*

S. W.



## PRELUDE

He gets up at an early hour and is already impatient for work. Work is his escape, his devotion, his glory. Impatiently he goes through his ablutions, dipping his face in a basin of cold water, with eyes wide open, splashing the water on his eyes seven times and then blotting the water from his face with a soft towel. As a boy in Ireland he was told to do this by a peasant and he has done it all his life. Most of his habits were picked up in that way and obstinately adhered to.

He steps almost stealthily into the warm dining room to eat the same old monotonous breakfast fussily set before him. He opens up *The Times*, glances through the obituary notices and settles down to the Correspondence columns.

Royally he walks down to his hut in the dip of the garden, across the well-kept terrace and down through the high grasses. Here in this wilderness he feels free. He settles down to write but he cannot find this and he cannot find that. He can never find anything now. There are numerous letters to write, demands for interviews, demands for visits, for autographs, for photographs, and he is asked to deliver a course of lectures. Occasionally, very occasionally, there comes an interesting letter, which he carefully pockets, to be forgotten completely.

He has devised a series of coloured printed cards with sufficient space left for his remarks. These curt remarks are his pride and his joy; a nice note here and a rude one there.

One correspondent hears that G.B.S. is ninety, not nineteen, and another that he feels more like nineteen than ninety. To one, G.B.S. writes that he is in dire penury and to another that he is a millionaire. He takes great pains to inform everyone that he never gives autographs and signs with a great flourish.

Suddenly he grows impatient with these merciless demands on his time and he flings correspondence aside and stares at the blue pad before him as a prisoner stares at the sky.

His eyes press for sleep for he has already been awake for

four hours with nothing achieved. His head begins to droop.

His pad shows no writing. He must go on, he must go on. If he does not, he will be miserable for the rest of the day. He writes and smiles, he smiles and writes. The pen is yielding its task at last.

Lunch is a dreary interval between work and sleep. The table is laid, everything is there; sufficient for five; but he is glad to be alone. A little soup, a sandwich or two and he is ready to stretch on a couch and forget. He has learnt how to relax and how to rest. . . .

He knows the walk to our place even better than a blind man. So many times has he done it that he can count the paces from gate to gate. On his side are the pines and chestnuts planted by his wife; on our side young birches and an old oak.

The number of times we have walked the little distance together, from his place to ours and our place to his. Like a pendulum swinging to and fro. . . .

## *Chapter One*

THE familiar Wagnerian theme on the knocker announced his arrival. He left his black woollen cap and gloves outside, his stick and coat he carried in with him. In the corner of the settee, a few cushions were always ready for him. Always he asked if we were busy and were we sure we could spare the time. Always the same formula.

"I have no flesh on my body and so I must have a substitute. I loathe cushions but I cannot sit on my bare bones," he said as he settled himself comfortably for a chat. And as we warmed into the conversation, he forgot his age and he forgot the treachery of nature and we were all young again.

He started by deploring his old age: "Unfortunately I come from a good heredity and must watch myself decaying. I should have been dead long ago."

But if there was the least hint of sympathy he would flare up and denounce us. He loved talking and when we intruded it was to excite opinion and memory.

"I made them wake me. I want to talk to you urgently. You must stop that Birthday Book because they will all think that I am behind it. I am an old dodderer so why revivify a corpse?"

The reference was to a book I was bringing out in honour of his ninetieth birthday.

"Not a soul will be interested. They will praise me for the things I loathe and loathe me for the things I hold dear. I'm not interested in my success." And he launched into an attack on the successful, demolishing them one by one and depositing them in the garbage heap.

Nor were we interested in his success. What interested us was the value of his contribution to the many aspects of life. The war had ended and it was necessary to think constructively again. Here we could concentrate on one person, a unique and original character and yet a child of the age. Others had tumbled like

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skittles but his reputation seemed to have gained rather than declined.

When he saw that his protest was of no avail, he built up the character which he wanted me to portray in the book: "I am a poet, essentially a poet. I lived in a time when poetry meant something to people. In my penurious days I carried a Shelley in my pocket and thought myself the wealthiest person in the world. That book was my talisman."

He sat up, arms folded, defiantly reciting speeches from *Man and Superman*, *St. Joan* and *The Doctor's Dilemma*, and his voice turned everything he uttered into poetry. He knew his works by heart and enjoyed repeating them, laughing at the wit, here and there repeating a passage to get the full flavour of it.

I did not tell him that I was finding it impossible to get any poet to write on 'G.B.S. as a Poet'. I asked many but there was always the long wait and then the polite refusal.

"I suppose it will end in my doing the whole book for you, as I have done every other book on me. Invariably I have to do the whole thing myself. In a way I enjoy it because I can give each according to his need. To one biographer I am a saint and an idealist; to another, a Don Juan with a woman in every theatre."

As a matter of fact I did not show him any of my contributions for I was too well aware of this propensity to correct and rewrite other people's work beyond all recognition. I had invited each contributor to write his own independent opinion regardless of what G.B.S. himself thought it necessary to say.

"I have no respect whatever for any living critic," he said. "The critics are incapable of understanding anything and art and poetry are foreign languages to them. It is because of these people that Morris and Burne-Jones are considered obsolete. They'll come back in spite of the critics. I have lived long enough to see the revival of reputations. What happens is that a certain critic (or a huddle of critics) becomes the dominant voice and all those who do not fall in with his definition are brushed aside. It is a matter of chance whether it is Clive Bell or Herbert Read, Desmond MacCarthy or T. S. Eliot, James Agate or Ivor Brown. I am out of it with the young people."

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I suggested that no young person could possibly have the leisure or the digestion to take in the numerous works of Shaw. The older people had grown with him, reading his works as they came out, one by one.

"I know that I am placed on the unreachable shelves of the classics, out of sight. I can be as inarticulate as any modern poet and as dull as any poetic dramatist if that is all that is wanted of contemporary writers. In my time one had to talk clearly or not at all. So I have got into bad habits. I have as keen a sense of beauty as any man, but beauty is now out of fashion and I do not quite know what kind of ugliness is all the rage now. I cannot keep up with the young."

"But what young people have you in mind?" I asked.

He could not think of a single one. Then suddenly he blurted out: "Robert Bridges."

We laughed. He enjoyed the assumption of complete ignorance of contemporary effort.

"I wrote my *Sanity of Art* to establish my right to communicate with people like William Morris and I must write something today to establish my right to communicate with T. S. Eliot. Or better still, I must look through some of my early unpublished work to give a lead to contemporary thought. In my time we made love by writing heavy philosophical works; for a while it looked as if I might even have become the son-in-law of William Morris when I launched my attack on Max Nordau, and as you know I netted Charlotte through my *Quintessence of Ibsenism*."

The thought of *The Sanity of Art* being a *billet-doux* amused me but I should have known what pains he took to win his ladies. He was still receiving love-letters from young ladies informing him that he understood them better than their husbands, and he never failed to answer such letters.

"I settle down to another book as a relief from the intolerable boredom and as soon as it is published there is a shoal of proposals."

He looked helplessly at the oncoming darkness and stood up. "You are the most obstinate person I know, Inca. If I die tonight there will be not a soul interested in your book about me and it

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will be so much loss to yourself and to the publishers. I am tired of being told things about myself, I would much rather hear of a cure for constipation."

"One moment, I'll bring your gloves and cap," I said.

"No," was his decisive reply, but he waited and was carefully helped with his coat. His cap he put rakishly over one eye, and, stick in hand, walked out. When he reached the steps at the gate, leading down to the lane, he became extremely cautious.

"My feet are always letting me down," he said. "I am a man of extremes, a sound head at one extreme and weak legs at the other."

In the lane he suddenly looked up and stopped dead.

"Aeroplanes!" he exclaimed.

A flock of wild geese were flying south, one encouraging the other with the mournful noise we heard.

"Reminds me of Henry Irving in *The Bells*," he said when he realized what was happening. "I have an advantage over you; I am like the Albert Hall where everything is heard twice over, but in my case everything is also seen twice over. Once my only claim to being normal was my perfect sight and now even that has gone."

At his own gate he stopped for a further chat, like a P.S. in a letter. "People never learn from experience, they only get into bad habits. Hardly has the war stopped and we are already talking about the next one. I want to show you something. Can you spare a minute?"

We walked round to the back of the house and into the dining room. Here I waited while he went into the study to look for a paper but he came back empty-handed.

"I cannot find it. I had it ready but I can never find anything now. Everything now is immediately put out of sight. Tidiness, like cleanliness, is the bane of modern life. One can never find anything or get anything done. No sooner do I put anything down than it is whisked out of sight, never to be found again. That is called efficiency. The Civil Service has developed this thing to perfection. I must have the things about me, otherwise they get on my mind. With me, out of sight is not out of mind, unless I deliberately put it out of my mind."



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He decided to have one more search, like a man with many pockets hunting for a train ticket.

"It's of no consequence," he said in the most forlorn of tones. "I don't know how people have got the idea that I am all out for tidiness. If my gardeners had their way they would mow the lawn all day and every day. I prefer wild grass. I won't have my lower lawn cut."

He started following me to the gate but I insisted that he stay behind. "Otherwise I shall have to come back with you and that can go on for ever."

"Nothing goes on for ever and the things that last least of all are truth and beauty. Set a lie going and it is impossible to dislodge it, but you take your life into your hands when you utter a truth. Luckily, a truth only comes once in two thousand years or so, and a half-truth looks so much like a lie that it is permitted to pass unmolested."

Something must have happened that day. His wildest conclusions about humanity hung on a floating feather of experience.

"Even a half-truth is better than none at all," I said, turning to go.

"Do you think chalk and opium would do the trick?" he asked, winking mischievously.

"We don't want another Coleridge," I said.

"None of these things work with me. The things which made De Quincey and Coleridge see visions only send me into dreamless sleep. Any novel could do that without a doctor's prescription. The fact is I don't do enough exercise. I miss my daily swim more than anything in the world, more even than other people miss their blood-bath."

It was as well that he had got back because a blizzard was trying to lift our homes and send them raging into the sky.

The next day he came in happily, informing me that the package he had looked for was not missing after all. Out of his capacious pocket came a large envelope with photographs of dead relatives.

"What I really wanted to show you is a terrible threat. A lady in America has just sent me a letter to say that she is on her way to look after me. It is terrible because she means to do it. She is

the one I have spoken to you about and if she comes she will break up my respectable household. You will have to have her at your place if she comes."

I laughed but could not have looked very happy because we had given hospitality before to his unwanted guests.

"You talk as if there are oceans between our two homes."

"Ah, but I could forbid her entry into mine and I could see her and bully her away from your place. However I have already sent her a telegram to stop her. I hope it will reach her in time. I have told her that I have a devout Catholic maid and a Presbyterian cook who will walk out on me if she enters the house. It will give me a very bad name. I am the old-fashioned Puritan and these women insist on regarding me as a Bohemian. There must be a periodic stocktaking in friends as in everything else." I think he was really scared this time.

"Even at ninety I am not free of their attentions. Sensual actresses fling their arms round me and hug me because they want me to let them play St. Joan and Candida. They know that it is the shallow side in me that is most sensitive; they send me idiotic ties and chocolates because they want to play Cleopatra. I have my hands full in keeping them at bay." We had noticed that he was wearing a jazz tie which did not, in any way, harmonize with his conventional striped collar and Irish tweed suit.

"I never really cared for women and that is why I could toy with them. If marriage hadn't existed as a natural phenomenon I would never have invented it. Like all nature it creates the situation least useful to its purpose. No mortal can achieve excellence in two arts; as I gave all my time to plays I could only play with everything else."

"I have just received an article on you from a very responsible person, putting you down as the greatest moral force in the last hundred years."

"You are not going to permit that kind of talk? No person who thinks for himself is ever considered a moral force. If you want me brushed aside put me down as a moral force. Isn't that what they said of Gladstone? You must let me edit the book for you and please keep out all admirers. They would reduce me to a pious humbug."

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The sunshine was streaming into the room as we sat by the blazing coal fire in front of us and a large electric fire at the right of G.B.S. Occasionally he would grip the heat as if it were something solid which he needed to hold.

"Why on earth do we have to write with our hands? They are so far away from our brains. Our limbs were given to move about with and now we write and paint and express our deepest emotions with them. When Beethoven runs over the keyboard it is not the old original purpose of running and grasping."

"Have you ever tried a dictaphone, G.B.S.?"

"I am no good at spontaneous expression. From the earliest days I have written out my speeches, word for word. And let me tell you, though you must have already guessed it, I think out what I am going to say before I come to you. It is very difficult to manoeuvre you into saying the things for which I have a ready retort."

"As you do in your plays."

"That is what I have always got to do . . . if I am to get anywhere at all. You see, I started with the public meeting and finished up with the theatre and there is a big difference between them. In the theatre you must fill the stalls with gentlemen, while at a meeting you attract your own kind. As the gentlemen have to pay for the seats, you have to give them value for money and you can only do this by making them laugh. Not so at meetings where people come to think and I can be as serious as I like. I always felt hurt when people laughed at my meetings for it disturbed my train of thought. Unfortunately, as I had to talk to educated audiences, that is, people who have had all originality and thought knocked out of them at school, the simplest truism uttered by me caused a sensation. It is like domestic life, where there is so much mutual deception that truth-telling may one day be made a ground for divorce."

"I can never understand why a domesticated person like yourself should always bear a grudge against simple domesticity."

"My dear Inca, domesticity is not simple. It is the very devil. Why is it that the most difficult things on earth are considered simple; sex, marriage, home-life . . . while the simplest things are considered too difficult to achieve?"

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I waited for his answer.

"Because biologically one leaps before one looks."

"But, surely, each one insists on marrying the most beautiful person on earth," I said.

"That is the usual formula, I know. But you have noticed that it is the plainest people who get married and the beautiful ones who are left on the shelf."

He had come in this time with neither an overcoat nor a raincoat and it had begun to rain, but that did not worry him in the least and he did not even accept the use of an umbrella.

"I have to change for dinner," he said, "so I may as well get wet. All the more reason for changing at once."

We did not dally at his gate.

## *Chapter Two*

THE spell of sunshine was as welcome as a full stop in a Henry James story. A cloud of starlings had gathered over the elm trees and it was a wonderful sight to see: the birds seemed to come from every corner of the world, and their busy twittering was a marked contrast to the eternal dumbness of the village. I wanted G.B.S. to share the sight of this Grand Coucher.

He was grateful that I woke him from his afternoon nap.

"I was in the throes of a maddening dream. I was talking Chinese with T.E. Lawrence and quite fluently. He made himself perfectly clear to me and, of course, he laughed at all my jokes."

"How do you know it was Chinese?" I asked.

"I took it to be Chinese. It may have been a talk in the world beyond the grave. Only I don't believe there is a world beyond the grave, and the last person I want to talk to is Lawrence. Oscar Wilde, yes; Chesterton yes, but not Lawrence."

"Well! Let's go for a walk."

We walked down the hill towards the elm trees and the hedges were full of twittering birds, all busy drinking raindrops from the naked twigs.

"You notice the similarity of the bird sounds to the Chinese tongue," G.B.S. pointed out. "Lawrence and I must have turned into birds. I'd rather be a tree than anything else on earth."

We walked a considerable distance. On the way back he stopped and said: "Birds have no time sense. They are already gathering here in expectation of my birthday and tomorrow there may be a snowstorm again. Reminds me of a first night at a theatre. I don't suppose I'll ever go into a theatre again. A play would have to be very exciting to keep me awake. To an old man it is the trivial that is exciting; wars and revolutions leave him cold." He looked back and beamed with satisfaction. "I must have walked a mile at least today," he pointed out.

We entered my place and he sat down exhausted.

"I've been dreaming of such a walk for weeks. I cannot

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understand why it is that the Forth Bridge always enters my dream of heaven. The landscape is very much like this but with great structures of latticed steel."

"You've been inspired by Paul Nash," I said.

"I've been inspired by nobody," he snapped out. "I only have to confess a thing and you at once enter into explanations. Isn't the fact miraculous enough?"

"The explanation is often more miraculous."

"Never. You, Inca, can tell me how you came to live in Ayot St. Lawrence but can you or any philosopher from Plato to Croce tell me *why* you came to this simple out-of-the-way little village?"

"Predestination," I suggested.

"Now if Gabby came, I could understand. We're in business together. He doesn't move a step without my advice. There is no such thing as predestination. If you take the chance of chance out of the world then all the magic goes from it. There was no earthly reason why I should live at Ayot. Charlotte hated it and I never felt at home here and yet I have rooted here. The only thing that keeps most people alive is the chance of something happening, and something does happen. It will not happen when you expected it and *as* you expected it but it will happen. The only thing one can be certain of is that something will happen to upset all one's calculations. They calculated on the smooth running of the social system but I came along. The only fun I get in life is upsetting people's calculations."

"I think that if you made an effort, you would be able to walk in the dark," I said. "It would be interesting to find out how your helplessness in the dark arose."

"Why must it have arisen from a past experience? There will be a time when we will do away with darkness as we will do away with disease and poverty. The first step is to hate darkness and I am the first step."

"Is there anything in nature that you would leave?" I asked.

"There is nothing sacred about nature. The Life Force is the one inescapable thing in life. It caught me unawares and made me the poetic, irrational, passionate creature I am. If you

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start explaining it I'll walk out of your place, never to return. It is the inexplicable natural fact and has to be accepted."

His voice grew loud and clear and his tone dogmatic.

"I came to my particular view-point by watching my own acquired habits and found myself quite interesting. Forty years ago I informed the Fabian Society it was essential for us if we are to improve the human type to improve our habits, consciously and deliberately. Education must not only consist of the three Rs, that is the Reading of music, the Writing of poetry and Rhetoric, but Manners must come first of all. Those are the habits I deliberately acquired and what I did yesterday, everybody else will do tomorrow as a matter of course."

"What reason have we for believing that your Life-Force is a force for good? All fanatics are convinced that they are the instruments of something or other. We've had an example of that only recently and millions of lives have been lost as the result of it."

"Don't get too touchy about the lives. It's the property I am sorry about."

That kind of joke ceased to amuse me.

"Talking about the fear of the dark," he said, as if he had been considering it while he was cantering and bantering, "I must have caught it in Dublin when the grown-ups gathered to play and sing in the long winter evenings and left me out of it. I was pitched into the outer darkness while Lee, my mother and their boon companions enjoyed their music-making in the warm glow of the room. No boy carried within him such indignation as I did and the consequent malevolence had to find outlet somewhere."

"That explains your interest in the Greek drama," I said.

"It isn't as simple as that. I had no passionate attachment to my mother. I rather despised her for having brought such a miserable specimen as myself into the world."

Although it was getting dark, we did not switch on any lights. He continued:

"I might have grown up with a hatred of music as well as the dark, converting Lee into a diabolical monster, if my mother had not taken me to Dalkey one day and, as I was enjoying the

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wonderful sense of space and light, told me that through the kindness of Lee, we were going to live there. This must have been the happiest moment of my life: the diabolical monster was transfigured into a divine creature and music the expression of the gods. My life henceforth became a conflict between indignation and fantasy: they lived side by side like semi-detached villas separated by a thin wall, each watching the other with obtrusive eyes."

G.B.S. chuckled to himself as he unfolded this story.

"What utter nonsense all this psychological analysis is! I can go on like this for hours, explaining everything and yet explaining nothing whatever. I love music and that is all there is to it. If by explaining how I came to it, you could create the identical conditions for everybody and so create a universal interest in music, then it would be worth while going into it; but what sends one man singing sets another swinging. Anyhow, nothing on earth will make me believe that every act of a living creature is imposed on it by circumstances. There is something in every human being independent of experience, a soul, if you like, that can gaze on the world and laugh at it . . . or weep at it."

"And you think the soul is the seat of all goodness?" I asked.

"I know nothing about goodness. I am honoured when I am identified with everything that is evil. The shock-troopers of the soul are always regarded as fiends. The wrong people have stolen the right words and words are the limbs with which life moves. The detestable theological jargon is mere abracadabra in Shawland. The soul is the Evolutionary Appetite, the Consuming Passion, the Will of God."

"Your Evolutionary Appetite may be a blind force," I said.

"No more blind than I am in the dark. When I put myself in your hands, I know I'll get home. Sam Butler doubted the beneficence of the Appetite and we have more reason than he to doubt with two ghastly wars and another brewing, and yet I say there is a soul. If in my works I have not conveyed it, then I am a clown and nothing else."

The room was in complete darkness and in the void he dropped into a whisper.



## Shaw's Corner

"I've heard from Bridie. I've advised him not to write for your book," he said.

"I've received his article," I informed G.B.S. "I'll return it at once."

"Don't be stupid. He must have sent it the moment he received my letter."

"He enclosed your letter with the article."

"Then you have read my letter?" G.B.S. asked. "It's strange how these independent minds never move an inch without seeking my advice and when I give it, they invariably do the opposite. It's this resistance to a powerful destructive force that keeps the world going. If something falls on your head, what happens? There is a bump to mark the impact and at once there is a flow of healing energy, even if you are unconscious. I am the most powerful destructive force the world has ever known. I don't mind what people say about me: I have trained the world not to believe them. I can tell any lie about myself and not a soul will disbelieve me, but if *you* try and tell the truth, not a soul will believe *you*."

He was in a panic about the book and I could not make out what he feared.

After I had seen him to his house, I realized that he had walked home in the darkness without help of any kind.

Next day when G.B.S. came in he was bursting with indignation. He informed me that he had not written a word the whole morning because somebody had asked for the return of a manuscript and he could not find it anywhere.

"I remember it quite well. It was fat. I don't know what to say about it. I should have returned it immediately but there was a mention of me in it and I thought I ought to glance at it. They have turned me into a schoolmaster, correcting every little sentence about me."

"That little fountain pen can destroy a reputation," I said.

"The gold has lost its glitter. If I don't stop writing, I'll lose every bit of reputation I've ever had. And I must go on writing or go mad. What am I to do? Nature has already reduced my day to a few hours. Besides, I've stopped being interested in

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people. I'm not interested in anything but my ailments and they are too few to occupy all my time."

"You should not," I said, "permit the loss of a book to affect the whole of your philosophy. You've had a most interesting life. . . ."

"Utter nonsense. Barnum left a much larger sum of money than my wife and I ever possessed. Don't make the mistake of thinking that because I can create laughter, I must have known happiness. The one thing that might have given me satisfaction has been denied me and that is art."

"And how do you know you would have derived satisfaction from art?"

"How does one know anything? I feel my life has been void without it. I have nothing to look back upon and nothing to look forward to. Nature despises me even more than it despises a vacuum."

"Would you like me to help you to find the manuscript?" I asked.

"And upset everything else. Anyhow, you've got your own work to do."

We went back together and there it was on the chair. He must have set the whole house searching for it while he sat on the chair writing.

It was a very wet day and not cold. A bullfinch flew along the hedge and a robin followed us down the brick steps and almost as far as the shelter.

"We can talk more freely here," he said.

There was hardly room enough for two in the little hut and so I sat on a heap of papers behind the electric fire. I recalled the number of people who had worked in such a hut away from the interruption of the house; Tolstoy, Thoreau, Meredith, Edward Carpenter, Jupp, Gilbert Murray. . . . With those who could afford it, the hut had taken the place of the garret.

"I like it here because life is reduced to the barest minimum. This little shelter is as much as I can carry on my back."

In the still air I could hear the faintest sound of far-distant bells.

"I wonder where the bells come from?" I asked.

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"It must be the sound of the telephone bell in the house," he replied. "Somebody trying to get through to ask me what I think of some momentous incident. I am supposed to sit here brooding on world events. Mostly I sleep, as you know."

"I won't disturb you, G.B.S."

"I want you to disturb me. I'm not disturbed enough. My life has fallen into such an even routine that I sometimes have to ask myself whether I am asleep or awake. I am sorry I can't give you tea. This is the time of the day when all the mischief is brewed, tea-time, the most depressing time of the day. I understand another such meal has been instituted in the morning: elevenses. I have managed to do my thinking without the stimulus of tea or coffee."

He examined an article he had prepared for the press, showed obvious dissatisfaction with it and threw it in the waste-paper basket. "You'd think that by now I'd made up my mind about everything, but nothing seems to satisfy me. It takes me half a day to frame a sentence and a minute to destroy what I've written. Old age needs a medium other than words. When the seminal impulse is lacking, there is nothing left but repetition."

He informed me that he was asked to write on 'Royalty' but he had nothing whatever to say about it. "I am glad that there is a portrait of me in Buckingham Palace."

### *Chapter Three*

I SAID: "In the course of a few weeks, we'll hear the cuckoo again."

"That old bore. The two birds I can't stand are the cuckoo and the nightingale. Like our radio personalities and our film stars, they are over-publicized. I have to fight like the devil to keep out of the public eye and retain my self-respect. The black-bird is more to my liking, it composes as it sings. Plays that do not write themselves unplanned are outside my practice. I am always shocked by what I write."

"Then you are the only one who is shocked."

"I must say I am often shocked by the language used and the questions asked of me. Friends of mine had a Catholic page-boy who used to prostrate himself before shrines and when missed on one occasion, was reported by the cook, who had a habit of mixing up her words, to be 'prostituting' himself in the garden."

G.B.S. turned away a little as he told me the story, fearing that he might shock me. He showed me a letter he had received from a stranger who thought he had a kind sympathetic face and would not mind answering. While I was reading it, G.B.S. remarked: "An old man is the most cunning of all animals and is given the most benign and innocent of faces."

The letter, in a round schoolgirl hand, informed him that she had been married for ten years and for the last year had not been on speaking terms with her husband but had to concede his conjugal rights. She always remained completely passive but it was driving her mad. What was she to do?

"Shall I throw it in the waste-paper basket, Inca? I have thought out an answer but it occurred to me that it might be a trap to get me into correspondence. I get three such letters a day. When my face was demoniacal I received ten such letters every day. I am advising her to put common sense before passion. A silent man is worth his weight in gold, women have worshipped

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worse deities in their time. I must write something to make her laugh."

"Did you put common sense before passion?" I asked.

"I was always a model husband. Passion didn't come into it. The most moving domestic scene is when husband and wife are hidden behind their newspapers and the wireless is full on. It takes about a month to reach it. It took me longer than that because there was no wireless in those days. Men and their wives seldom follow their pleasures together. They resemble the little wooden figure of the man and the woman, which, moving forward and backwards in a small painted house, denote the changes in the weather. While one of these is within, the other is out of doors."

I suggested a series of coloured postcards dealing with all marital problems. It would certainly have saved G.B.S. a great deal of time.

"I've thought of that but unfortunately no two marriages are alike and there are not enough colours to go round. Think of Romney's wife: she nursed him through a fever, herself then a young girl, and he married her for her pains. He lived with her for a few years, gave her a family and left her. For forty years he did not see her again. He returned broken and old to be nursed once more and he died in her arms. . . ."

I could not make out from the matter-of-fact way in which he told the story whether he thought the lady wonderful or foolish. It was the kind of story which would have moved Ellen Terry to tears.

He brought out his hoary chestnut: "An Indian prince's favourite wife was dining with him when she caught fire and was burnt to ashes. 'Sweep up your misses,' he said to his weeping staff, 'and bring in the turkey!'"

"Have you ever thought of bringing out a guide to marriage?" I asked.

"When I was very young, yes. But when I was about to marry my hair suddenly went grey. I went to get my hair cut. The man asked whether I wanted it short and before I could answer, he produced an instrument like a lawnmower and in an instant my red locks fell like withered grass. And all that was

left was a white undergrowth which turned into an overgrowth. People asked what shock I had experienced to have turned my hair white in a single night. My audacity went with my red locks."

As we walked up from the shelter to the house I asked G.B.S. if he had noticed that he walked home the other evening without my assistance.

"I did. But knowing you would put it down to everything else but the truth, I refrained from mentioning it. According to Freud, art, religion and socialism all meet in unholy conclave in the Oedipus complex. It is true that Shelley and Sam Butler hated their fathers, but if it is a normal feature of human nature, why isn't there more art and more religion? It is only through art and religion that the world will be saved and Freud says they spring out of hate! Hatred only breeds hate. Art and religion spring from love. Freud counts for nothing with me; I cannot take him seriously."

It was obvious that Freud was trespassing on Shaw's territory and had to be driven away. Ever since he dealt Nordau a mortal blow, G.B.S. felt art to be his own province. Poor Freud was finally excluded from the holy company of the Sages.

"Have you ever read Freud?" I asked.

"It is as well for the Freudians that I haven't. In the same way that I routed the Marxians by being the only one (or practically the only one) who read Marx, so if I read Freud, it would be ill for the Freudians. Marx was no Marxian and I am certain Freud was no Freudian as I am no Shavian. I suppose a person cannot be modern unless he is a confusion of all these. I have never pretended to be modern; I am far too much in advance of the time to be modern."

As we climbed the brick steps he fell. The frost had played havoc with the bricks: they were so loose that it required much dexterity to balance on them.

"The only excitement I get these days," G.B.S. explained.

"You must get them repaired," I said.

"You're a kill-joy," he replied. "I have to create obstacles to make life possible. The dull uniformity of my life appals me. If I didn't have a fall or two every day, there would be nothing to look forward to."

## *Shaw's Corner*

We got going about the repair of the steps immediately and in spite of restrictions, the thing was simpler than we thought. G.B.S. was taken aback by the speed of the transactions. He gazed in awe at the solid and slightly erection and walked up and down the steps. "I am a sailor who has just stepped on shore and doesn't feel quite safe on solid ground. All the same, if you do these things for me, I'll stop helping myself and that will be bad for me."

He told me this parable: "In a field where Barrie and I sat there were lambs. One of them strayed away from its mother and was lost. Barrie had to give up his writing and lead the lamb back to its mother. Hardly had Barrie returned to his work before another lamb did just the same. The bleating was terrific. There was nothing else to do but for Barrie to put down his work and take it back to its mother. They kept on doing it, one after another. After a time instead of looking for their mothers themselves, they just came to Barrie knowing that he had nothing better to do than find their mothers for them."

G.B.S. fell back on the couch and said: "I don't think Barrie liked me. He said to Galsworthy one day: 'Formerly wise men used to grow beards. Now other persons do so.' Like all very polite and agreeable people, he was not accessible to ideas. One has to go back two thousand years to get on easy terms with some persons. Although Barrie and I were neighbours we might have been living on opposite mountain ranges. I also felt like that with Galsworthy."

As we walked down the lane, G.B.S. asked me to explain why it is always more satisfying to walk outside the curtilage. "I am waiting for you to say some thundering lie like 'mother fixation'. It was a very loose form of fixation and easily came unstuck. She certainly didn't care for me. I was probably the product of a drunken brawl. I used people and toyed with their affections but never felt attached to them. Charlotte's relationship to her mother was of a much more complicated type. She hated her but having a fearful streak of conscience and sense of duty she felt she owed her respect and devotion and bowed to her domineering authority. That conscience was Charlotte's undoing, and she determined never to marry. In a way she never did."

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"That explains her socialism."

"It explains nothing. Even conservatives have been known to have domineering mothers. We took to socialism as ducks to water to find the water vitriol. I made it my natural element and spurted vitriol wherever I went."

"Living with Charlotte made your work much easier," I said.

"I once inquired of a woman friend how long a walk it was from her place to mine. And she answered: 'It all depends on whom you are walking with.'"

G.B.S. eyed me roguishly and said: "I'm not in agreement with the commandment that we must honour our parents. You are a parent, what do you feel about it?"

"I didn't think there was anything in me to honour and always felt ashamed of the world we brought our children into."

"Charlotte actually sat down and thought things out and decided against having a child in case she (she was certain it would be a girl) grew up to be like her mother. Now that Eugenics has made such strides the future marriages will be arranged by scientists according to genes and the quality of the children will be determined by artificial insemination. No more Shaws and Shakespeares and Beethovens. The world would be purged of the only people who have ever mattered in the world. You know the story of Francis Thompson? The Meynells had got a super-fine party to meet the genius. He was late. Mrs. Meynell played soft tunes to prepare their minds and hearts for what was to come. At last he arrived, very drunk, and was immediately sick. The last time I met old Meynell, he must have been ninety or even a hundred, he said: 'I don't know what's the matter with me: every time I go out, my legs are so weak that I feel like an old man.'"

A young dairy farmer was leading his handful of cows home and one of them insisted on standing in the middle of the road; nothing would make it budge. "He must be afraid of my white beard," G.B.S. suggested.

"He hates going indoors, that's what it is," the farmer explained.

"He doesn't know where you're taking him," G.B.S. said.

"They're the most intelligent animals on earth. When I take



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them to the slaughter house, you should see the look in their eyes. These quiet ones understand most."

"They don't say they are giving themselves for the cause of humanity like our young men," G.B.S. said.

When at last the cow was persuaded to move and the farmer disappeared round the corner, G.B.S. asked me who the young chap was.

"I recognized the cow but did not know the man," he said. "I often stop to talk to her."

"Then it is your doing, this refusal to obey orders."

Again as we approached his place I felt the incompatibility of house and man. When selecting a fountain pen for a friend, he said that such a pen must fit the person as becomingly as a dress, but he did not take the same care over a place which was to be his workplace as well as his deathplace. He was not in a position to choose his birthplace but he was in a position to choose his deathplace. The house reminded me of the hideous Ruskin accumulations in Oxford. Both were men of keen sensibility.

"I paid £6,000 for it," he said, winking at the structure. "It costs practically nothing to keep me: I don't need new clothes, my meals cost much less than a labourer's and I am out of the house all day in a shed which the people here consider hardly fit to hold a lawnmower and roller, and yet I have to work in my old age to make ends meet. It's a solid house and needs a heavy 'screw' to hold it together."

## Chapter Four

"I CAN hear you saying, Inca, that Shaw thinks he can run the world when he hasn't the sense to tackle a few steps," G.B.S. said as we were sitting under the blossoming apple tree.

Somebody had sent him a book in which the author, after seeing *Major Barbara*, wrote:

"See Shaw's *Major Barbara*: was there ever an author with so little poetry in his brains? I think it may be a good thing these social nightmares should be set on us, but this is not the way any social solution can come, for there is no healing in it and no love."

"That's the kind of stuff they'll all write when I am dead. The articles are already written but while I am alive, they will not rise out of their tombs," G.B.S. said. "No love! No wonder I am all ventilated with oldness and decay. The least regulated orgies of love grow innocent beside the orgies of ignorance and conceit. What kind of people become critics nowadays? Clever little Oxford boys who read essays before their tutors and were told that this was wrong and that was right. And those tutors once submitted their essays to their tutors. An original writer turns coal into diamonds and then the critics take the diamonds and reduce them to coal again."

G.B.S. could not take this kind of criticism and was feeling his way to a shattering reply. He must have sat up brooding on this insult and his first shafts always went in the direction of Oxford which was, in his eyes, a huge conspiracy to keep down original thought.

"Cheap ridicule is always lavished on those who unsuccessfully advocate 'extreme views'," I urged platitudinously.

"Unsuccessfully!" G.B.S. exclaimed. "Unsuccessfully! I dare anyone to say that I am not the most successful author that ever lived. I am launching my counter-offensive on my ninetieth

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birthday: a million copies of my books will be published! It will drive your book off the market. I am not going to let the pious people appropriate the words 'poetry' and leave me the dregs. Everything I have has come from poets: I picked up my vegetarianism from Shelley, my simplicity from Carpenter, my forthright speech from William Morris and my passion for fun from Oscar Wilde. As nobody reads these people I am regarded as 'my horrible unique self'."

"Cassandra must be your patron saint. Apollo ordered that her gift of prophecy should be useless," I said.

"The prophet is always confounded. Nothing ever happens as we expect it to happen. Fifty years ago when playgoers sought moral advancement in the theatre, I was branded as a pornographic author and suffered discredit and heavy loss in consequence. Nowadays when the pornographic play has come into its own, I am called a loquacious saint, I, the most silent person on earth. As a servant described me: 'He sits and writes and we forget he exists. Might as well have a corpse in the house.'"

"Why doesn't someone invent a pen that makes a loud noise as it moves?"

Don't whisper it to a soul. It is only the most fantastic ideas that prove true. I have no doubt that tomorrow I shall receive a pen which plays Mozart and I shall be photographed listening to it."

"I take it there will be a choice of pens."

"No sheep has a choice of pens. When I started as an author, all I looked forward to was a quiet life. I thought that nobody would ever question my habits provided they were up to a modest suburban standard of respectability."

"You should have written anonymously and never have permitted your photograph to appear in the papers."

"My work was so bad that it would have been attributed to George Meredith who was all the rage then but is as dead as Whistler now."

I pointed out that Whistler had a greater influence on contemporary interior decoration than Morris. The distempered rooms were certainly his inspiration.

"In those days I wrote to clarify my mind and it meant an

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unceasing flow of articles, books and plays. But now I can put down my beliefs in a few words as Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount. Unfortunately words breed words; they are as prolific as insects. If only we could think of a sterile medium, like abstract art, say."

"What are the few words?" I asked.

"Sexual fluidity. I want a system of society where sexual selection is least restricted. I regard sexual selection as the master-key to eugenics. The greatest barrier to healthy mating is inequality of income. When I told it to Henry James he said: 'Where innocence is bliss, it's folly to be wise.'"

"I prefer the Sermon on the Mount," I said.

"I remember once giving a black nickel watch *which worked* to a bright lad. He looked at it and said: 'I prefer a golden one even if it doesn't go.'"

I asked if the black nickel scheme would work.

"Work! The trouble would be to stop it working. The only difficulty would be living with the woman. The State should take responsibility for the children and every child born will have a right to food, clothing, education and shelter. That would get rid of all the Freudian complexes."

"What you advocate is free love."

"If you like to call the most expensive necessity free, you have my permission to do so. And as to love, where two human beings are equal love is an unnecessary emotional complication. It's time we stopped using the word. Remember we are all born slaves to our necessities and there is no need to make a virtue of them."

It was getting very chilly and we went inside. A visitor whom I had not seen for over twenty years was announced. He sat down as if he were in the habit of coming in and out of our place. G.B.S., as always with visitors, put him through a searching cross-examination. Within a few moments he ascertained his background, his education, his income and was soon beneath the skin. The argument was fierce and inconsequential.

G.B.S. insisted that Ruskin and Morris were the last of the great men.

"You cling to your illusions," the visitor declared.

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"I've never had any," G.B.S. replied.

"You believe you can change human nature, illusion number one. You believe. . . ."

G.B.S. interrupted him: "I believe that human nature has gone through a complete transformation during the last few years. The ordinary human being is an entirely different creature from the kind of person I met as a youth. And I think I have had a hand in the production drive."

The visitor laughed.

"You seem to think me funny. I've never been so serious in my life. In fact, it is when I'm most serious that I see nothing but grinning faces. I must put a halt to this laughter."

Again the visitor laughed.

Infuriated, G.B.S. exclaimed: "Anyone can be original. You only have to say what somebody else said the day before yesterday. People only recall what was said yesterday, that is if they have a good memory. You say that you know Churchill. Can you tell me whether Churchill's cigar is real? It's always the same cigar."

"As real as your beard and eyebrows."

"That's where Balzac is right. The simple produces the wonderful: Chamberlain's umbrella, Baldwin's pipe, my fluffy surround . . . wonderful!"

"We are still living in the age of miracles."

"Get rid of the miracles," G.B.S. answered, "and the world would fall to pieces. An Irish Catholic statesman of my acquaintance was advised by a clever political lady to adopt a certain not quite honest stroke of diplomacy. He refused. She asked why. He replied: 'Because I happen to believe that there is such a place as hell!'"

"Do *you*?" our visitor asked.

"Do I? Karl Marx lifted the lid and showed me hell; William Morris opened the skies and showed me heaven. William Morris has been pushed out of the way."

G.B.S. looked uneasily at his watch. "I must go now. Don't trouble to see me home. I'll manage."

We, of course, saw him to his gate. On the way a van carrying a load of German prisoners suddenly stopped dead in front of us

and one of them jumped out, clicked his heels and asked for an autograph.

"*Nein*," G.B.S. said, ready to walk on.

"You are the one Englishman we respect," the German said in broken English.

"That is what you say to every Englishman. I happen to be an Irishman."

"I do not understand," the German said.

"That is the beginning of all wisdom. The fault with the Germans is that they know everything and understand nothing. All the nonsense that was knocked out of your head by Einstein and Heine was carefully put back again by Hitler and Goebbels."

"You would not have said that if we had won," the German said.

"As I said, you understand nothing. The ideas have always come from conquered countries, from Ireland, from India, and now we are expecting great things from your country."

We proceeded on our journey. At the gate, G.B.S. said: "I receive letters every day from these people asking me to use my moral authority on behalf of their country. Anybody can sympathize with a country's failure but it requires a very fine nature to sympathize with a country's success. I am supposed to have nine brains and no heart. At my post mortem the world may be shocked to find that I had nine hearts and no brain."

"You said," the visitor remarked, "that the human being has been transformed. Can you tell me in what way?"

"When a person is transformed, he changes in every way. I see it in his look, in his talk, in his response. It's a miracle."

He pushed open the gate and walked rapidly down the path towards his shelter.

We walked on but there was so little to show in the village that the visitor was soon bored and we returned to our house where we forgot that we were stranded in mid-green.

The next time I saw G.B.S. I told him of a conversation I had with a young man in the village whose job it was to look after the rats while they were being kept for experimental purposes. He got to know them quite intimately, lovingly knew each one by name and had the highest opinion of their mentalities.

"A strange job for a strong young man," G.B.S. said.

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"He is very happy," I informed him.

"We have an infinite power of adaptation to any kind of job. When I complained about the horrid dump down the lane which made life unbearable for me, the workers said that I wanted to put them out of a job; and I heard one say that as I had not done a stroke of work in my life, I did not know what I was talking about."

"You failed to get the dump removed."

"I always fail in any reasonable proposition I put forth. If I had suggested putting a row of villas on the dump, every practical person would have gripped me by the hand and called me 'brother'. The more I know of rural life, the more I wonder at the uniqueness of Saint Joan. She was, as they say in these villages, a young person to have an opinion."

I asked G.B.S. if he found that he did his best writing in the quiet of the countryside.

"I can work anywhere but I do my best work always in the morning. I'm not a nocturnal brooder. My excesses, sexual and otherwise, have always been in the light of day. I've never awakened, like Blake, all hot and inspired, at three in the morning. My advice to newly-weds is always to wait till the morning."

It was a strange answer to my question.

"Talking about conditions," he added, "there was a writer whom I knew who complained that he could not write because he needed a green outlook for his composition.

'Give me a garden and I'll give  
My song as fair exchange.'

Well, we arranged to get him rooms in Piccadilly overlooking Green Park. It's true they were bachelor quarters, but from the point of view of inspiration, that was all to the good. All our best writers have been bachelors, even if they were married three times. When he had settled in I called on him and congratulated him on the outlook. He replied gloomily: 'That's nothing to me; I don't own the outlook.'

"'How wonderful it must be to have such a beautiful park to rest your eyes upon,' I pleaded.

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"It's nothing to me; I don't own the Park."

"Needless to say he did nothing but brood on his misfortune."

I said that I had heard a similar story from Sir Ebenezer Howard about a millionaire in Park Lane.

"What a dull prosaic man he was," G.B.S. remarked. "It's the dull people who are changing the face of the earth, while the bright ones rise like balloons and burst. I have always envied dull people and have tried to model my life on theirs. Ebenezer tried to interest me in a shorthand-type machine which would have eliminated the secretary, the bane and snare of every writer and business man, but nothing came of it. It's a pity because it took me years to discover a secretary who knew nothing whatever about my theories, tastes and temptations."

I told G.B.S. of Ebenezer Howard's wonderful funeral and how the people of the Garden City scattered wild flowers on his coffin. "They loved him."

"Yes, these prosaic people gather affection wherever they go. They are not great enough to inspire jealousy and so reach the top rung without being noticed. When I go, the younger men will cheer and never mention my name again. It will be bad form to refer to me. You'll see, Inca. And only because my work is infinitely superior to theirs."

"How do you want to be remembered, as an entertainer or a social reformer?" I asked.

"My interest in social welfare was and is a very real thing. Flaubert, Ibsen and Balzac looked upon the world at large with its innumerable activities as so much stuff for the literary workshop. They would peep and keep aloof. I pitched into the fight, gloried in the battle and turned my pen into a gun. If my gun now looks as dead and meaningless as that memorial in front of St. George's Hospital, so much the worse for me. But it did its work light-heartedly. There may not be a Tennyson to bemoan the 'Charge of the Light Brigade' but I assure you my charge was always nominal."

He enjoyed his pun and waited for a laugh. He continued:

"I suppose I'll be buried like Chekov. You know his wagon arrived in a green railway truck, the doors of which were



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labelled 'For Oysters'. Chekov would have thought it funny. Mine will be a red truck labelled 'Live Stock'."

Death was always a hideous anti-climax to G.B.S. For him, accustomed to dramatic situations, there was no drama in being summarily dismissed because of ill-health. We rarely discussed death and the thought of an after-life disgusted him. That night, however, the talk led round to 'life after death'.

"The first planchette to be imported into Ireland was in use at our home in Ireland when I was a boy. I agree, and every artist must agree, that we are possessed of an astral body which may leave the body and often does. It is not mere coincidence that you have come in just when I thought of you. But I have never been visited by the liberated astral self of a dead person and would not know how to receive it if it came. I hate messages and would only be bored to extinction by the trivialities of these spirits. None of them, if I am to believe the interviews, have gone beyond the nursery stage. In my own lifetime I have always refused to respond to the call for a message; now they want me to believe that after death, my resistance will be so weak, that I, a disembodied spirit, will be delivering messages to all and sundry. They took no heed of me when I was alive; why should they listen to me when bereft of personal charm? I sport the oak to all the dead souls seeking communication with me!"

"Many things surely have happened to you which you can only attribute to that kind of intervention," I said.

"Practically everything could be attributed to that. My life has been one miracle after another. I believe in the Communion of Saints. In fact the Saints do not have to communicate, they understand. As the Salvation Army lass said to me as she held me by the hand and looked into my eyes: 'We understand.'"

"We are inclined to believe that all saints are of the past."

"You mean that I find it easier to understand Ruskin and Morris than the modern poets and critics. I grant that. Only a saint would ever venture on becoming a poet today. My advice to would-be saints can be put in one word: Don't. Fasting is an economical way of living and, as Gandhi has proved, often gets things done: praying costs nothing and sack-cloth is rapidly becoming fashionable, but all the same I say: Don't. As a

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professional saint, it is my duty to lift up a warning finger. The world isn't ready and I don't suppose heaven is."

"Saints there will be till the world ends."

"Come, come, don't try the end of the world nonsense on me. Poor Ralph Inge grew quite gloomy contemplating the cooling of the sun and the freezing to death of mankind. By the time the sun cools we'll be able to heat the earth evenly and consistently by atomic energy. No more wintry summers. We'll be able to discard clothes and food and a saint's life will be lived as a matter of course. I can't help living like a saint. Do you think I enjoy it? Like the lady who stopped me down the lane. 'How wonderful it must be to know you are immortal!' she said. 'My good lady,' I replied. 'Very wonderful for you but a burden to me.' 'Mr. Shaw, you have only to say the word and every woman with a heart will come and share your burden.'"

"And what did you say to that?" I asked.

"Recalling Solomon, I said: 'One hell at a time,' and walked on. She is probably asking her husband what I meant and he will not tell her. No husband can possibly tell the truth to his wife and retain her respect."

He switched on the wireless because there was a talk he wanted to hear but hardly had the speaker uttered a sound before he quickly switched off and resumed the conversation.

"I don't like the man," G.B.S. said. "I judge these people by their vowel sounds. I was not nearly as clever as my socialist colleagues but I took the trouble to make myself understood, not only by clarifying my mind but by clarifying my speech. I was never flattered so much in my life as when an American, who didn't understand a word of English, said to me after a speech of two and a half hours: 'It was a pleasure to listen to you.'"

"You could recite the alphabet backwards and it would still be a pleasure to listen to you."

"Just like you, Inca, to bring the blasted alphabet up. Never mention the alphabet in this house if you do not want to be flayed alive. When I think of the waste this miserable alphabet involves, I feel like the sergent-major who, faced with a batch of new recruits, shouted: 'You're a lot of ante-diluvian museum

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specimens.' The adjectives are mine; I could not repeat the actual ones to a Quaker, especially as I am one myself. I am really a Jainist Tirthankara as of eight thousand years ago. My one boast in life is that I got Mrs. Patrick Campbell to utter the forbidden word. And because *Pygmalion* was a howling success she had to utter it every day except Sunday."

"It still brings the house down."

"And fills the coffers. I received a letter from a Repertory company asking me if I would let them put on *Getting Married* without a fee as it would probably not attract a single person. I answered: 'I wrote it for the married people, not the single. *Pygmalion* is guaranteed to attract single people, so try that and pay the fee.' What a life!"

"What is life?" I said involuntarily.

G.B.S. looked at me to see if I was well. "I don't know and you don't know and nobody knows. Biology cannot even tell us the initial difference between a dead body and a live one. Most people who consider themselves alive are corpses and won't own up to it. It is the dead who crucify the living. The dead propagate more dead and the others, afraid of life, die childless."

Laski often told a story of how Prime Minister MacDonald, when visiting Webb, was always too modest to ask for the toilet and so had to cut off an important conference to seek comfort elsewhere. A visitor to Shaw's Corner found himself in the identical situation and had good reason for calling on us.

I always wanted to bring this fact to the notice of G.B.S. but in spite of our intimate association, never succeeded. That evening I took my courage in both my hands and, as always on such occasions, was much blunter than I should have been.

"Do you think I don't know, I of all people? I always say to myself: 'He'll have to go soon and the sooner, the better.' Otherwise I'd never get rid of my visitors."

I wondered why he said: 'I of all people' and learnt of the chronic kidney trouble.

"I'm glad you've brought it up, Inca. I've always wanted to, but was too Victorian. Please don't tempt me with milk again. I am afraid I'm incontinent."

## *Chapter Five*

G. B.S. needed his legs as a bird needed its wings. Walking was getting increasingly difficult and the thought of being confined to his bed worried him. He said that he had a friend who had been confined to bed for years and she looked younger and happier every time he saw her. With books and wireless this was a world well suited to a static life. He was not going to give way to happiness, however.

He especially asked me to accompany him to the church.

"I haven't been there for some time and I miss it," he said, as if expecting me to refuse.

We passed the elms and I said that Tennyson occasionally rang a bell with his lines:

" 'The moan of doves in immemorial elms,  
And murmuring of innumerable bees.' "

"All poets get an occasional good line, even Tennyson," G.B.S. said contemptuously. He would not hear a word in favour of this poet. "I last read him about seventy years ago, I suppose. The same with Meredith. If I find I have no use for an author or artist, I leave him alone. I am not interested in culture. I must be the most uncultured person in the world. The modern stuff is barren. I don't know what you find in it."

We walked slowly, he leaning on my shoulder. The kittens from the wooden farm followed us but when we passed through the little gate, took no more interest in our movements. The path was muddy and the dung scattered over the approach reminded him of his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It was dank and gloomy within the church but there was a silence which held us for a moment. He sat with his head resting on his hands. I waited for him to talk.

"I hear you mean to leave Ayot," he said.

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I assured him that we were staying.

"They are all saying that you are leaving," he insisted.

"Isn't it strange, G.B.S., that you, who have the reputation for being the most critical of all people, should take any old rumour that comes to you as gospel truth?"

"Thanks for your lecturette, Inca. If I did not take most things on trust, where would I be? I am the most credulous person on earth. I took for granted that the church would be here, that the lane still existed, that you would not bite; and I take for granted that there is a God. As to rumours, I have set more than one going myself to have it come back to me magnified and distorted. You must permit me a bit of fun occasionally. I always find that it is the intellectual people who are the most gullible."

Again there was silence.

"Did you notice the Missionary appeal at the gate?" he asked.

"I am afraid not," I answered.

"I need such a missionary to set things moving in the dark interior. You see my Victorian respectable upbringing has been too strong for me."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, G.B.S."

"Then I must tell you outright. I have not done my duty for four days and must do something about it. I think the body the silliest bit of construction in the world."

"It hasn't let you down."

"Oh, hasn't it! I have had to take the greatest care of myself. The strange thing is that the usual remedies never work with me. I am too normal a creature."

It occurred to me suddenly that he had brought me into the church because he thought help might come that way.

"I go in here and am profoundly recreated. I do not know why. It is the one drug that works with me," he said. "I used to get it with the trees and the earth and the sky. I did not know the name of a tree or a flower or a cloud but between them they conspired to give me all I wanted. But now I seem to need a more personal religion, something that takes the body as well as the spirit into account. Don't you?"

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"I think I've got something which might save God the trouble," I said.

"Good. 'God and my Neighbour' as Blatchford called his book. The three most silent men I knew were: Havelock Ellis, Inge and Blatchford. I suppose it was because they were inwardly at peace, the pagan, the Buddhist and the atheist. I have always been somewhat overawed by the men who have found peace. It is something I have never fully attained."

He walked up to the organ and played and sang something from the Ninth. Then he turned to me and said:

" 'In my youth the growls,  
In my age the owls,  
After death the ghouls.' "

I got this from your Tennyson. The old chap objected to a peerage but consented to take off a cocked hat and bow three times in the House of Lords because it would make the Queen so happy."

"Why has he become *my* Tennyson?" I asked.

"Wasn't it you who sent me a Tennyson? Now that I have an electric fire, I don't know where to deposit the literature I receive."

I denied having sent such a book.

"In that case, I can tell you this story. You know a cow died soon after a baptism here. And the farmer put it down to baptismal water which had been deposited in the pond.

'For they left their nasty sins in the pond  
And it poisoned the cow.'

Ayot hasn't moved an inch since Domesday and that's why I like it."

We walked back slowly across the meadow-land, the cows dreamily and hesitantly making way for us. I told him that I had just received an almost illegible scrawl from Sidney Webb informing me that his memory was rapidly going.

"I am sorry for old people. Sidney at least has had the strength of will to stop writing. Beatrice was a very useful wife for him. Her nature was hostile to mine; I must have been hateful to her. Luckily we had so many political problems to discuss there was no time for anger. As an Irishman and a creator of an atmosphere subtly disintegrative of households, I was antipathetic to her. Whenever I think of my behaviour in those days I grow afraid of myself. Unfortunately I am cursed with an excellent memory of things long ago."

"Whom did you really like wholeheartedly?"

"I don't know why it was, but all the women I really cared for were already married. The frightful sensation of being always on guard with another man's wife used to develop itself to such a devilish intensity that I could only release my feelings by writing plays. All my plays are heavily charged with feeling; one man's distress is another man's laughter."

Unfortunately the thing that helped his malady most was in very short supply and could only be obtained in London as a special concession. For this we went practically every day and were told that it was a competition between Sir Stafford Cripps and G.B.S. for the very limited daily supply. There was no doubt about his health improving. It was good to hear him say one day:

"It is a lot of nonsense about old people being set in their habits. It is the young who cannot afford to change because they have to fit into the system or go under. I was a freak and no sensible young person ever follows my example. The old people take my gibes as general propositions, the young take my general propositions as gibes."

The book in honour of his ninetieth birthday was nearing completion and July the twenty-sixth was approaching. Already notes were appearing in the press about his physical prowess, his mental agility, the symbol of active and hopeful old age, the wonder, the Sage of Ayot Saint Lawrence.

We suggested to the Book League they should arrange in their fine premises in Albemarle Street, London, an exhibition in his honour and when he heard of it, he thought it a grand opportunity to show 'the animal' to his admirers.

## *Shaw's Corner*

"You should have a series of tableaux depicting me in the various stages of decline. Call them: 'The Rise and Fall of G.B.S.' You can show me preaching my revolutionary Fabianism to a crowd of respectable workers in their Sunday best in Victoria Park. In another you can show me addressing a crowd in a prohibited area and expecting arrest. In another you can show me at Trafalgar Square on Bloody Sunday. In another you can show me on a squalid platform in the provinces lecturing to six people who had never heard of me, or you can show me addressing envelopes at an election. I'd like to arrange the show: it would draw the town at a shilling a piece. How long do you think it will take for me to be completely forgotten?"

We received a note from Devadas Gandhi, the son of Mahatma Gandhi, that he was staying at the Dorchester Hotel, Park Lane, and that he would very much like to spend a day with us. During the Round Table Conference we had seen a great deal of the Gandhis. We drove down to London to pick up Devadas. He hadn't changed much, looking a little more prosperous perhaps and grave for his years, but he soon relaxed and we joyfully enjoyed the drive home, eating ripe cherries bought from a barrow in Edgware Road. Ayot lay asleep as we entered, as if it had never awakened. Devadas found a surprise awaiting him: we had invited G.B.S. to lunch.

"Well, tell us about your father, he is the only other live man in the world," G.B.S. asked and waited for a reply.

"He wants to live like you to two hundred."

"If he goes in for fasts, he certainly will. I've been often tempted to give the whole show away and let it out that the fast is not a penance but a healing force. Of course, one can fast oneself to death as one can gorge oneself to death. But your father can be relied on to do all things in moderation. He is no fanatic. Tell me, did your father make a good parent?"

The question was so unexpected that Devadas hesitated as if he was weighing up the pros and cons. "Very good indeed, but it is only fair to say that I have a brother who thinks otherwise. He is a thorn in the flesh of my father."

This was just the kind of story G.B.S. liked to hear and he



egged on Devadas to tell more and more of his brother. "Children are sent in the world to try their parents. Anyhow, he permits you to stay at the Dorchester and wear West End clothes. You are doing the right thing. When I mixed in respectable company like the kind of people you find at a reception at the Soviet Embassy, I invariably wore a dress suit. The Russians are very bourgeois."

"What do you mean by 'he permits me'? You regard my father as an old-fashioned man."

"Well, I am inclined to regard most people as a little old-fashioned if they are more than one thousand years behind the times. Has your father read anything beyond the Sermon on the Mount?"

"He has read Ruskin, Thoreau and Salt."

"Then he has read more than I have because I have not read Thoreau. He is wise in keeping off living writers. There's none of any account."

"I'm so sorry," Devadas answered, realizing his omission.

While this was going on two advance copies of *G.B.S.* 90 arrived. The first went to *G.B.S.* and the other to Devadas for his father.

"Why all this fuss about a ghost who is one-tenth man?" *G.B.S.* asked of me as he glanced through the book. "It will sell as the best ghost story on the market."

The ghost went west and appeared at the opening of the Book League Exhibition in his honour and was more interested in the exhibits than anyone else.

"It's as the last minute of a person's life is supposed to be when his ghastly past is spread before him."

The weather was extraordinary for that time of the year. While we were at the Exhibition, a great darkness spread over the town, giving the impression of night rather than early afternoon. Suddenly the lowering clouds burst into a heavy downpour and London became a desolate city.

It was indeed a strange drive home. *G.B.S.* remained silent and only became communicative as we reached the dry land of Ayot.

"If I were fifty years younger, I would have thoroughly

enjoyed these ninetieth-year celebrations. As it is I am getting too old for that kind of thing," he said.

He looked this way and that and said: "I'll have to celebrate my century in this place. It's much more exciting."

A farm wagon passed.

"The horse took no notice of me. That's the right attitude. Far too much fuss is made of literary blokes."

The next day he rang, appealing to me for help.

"It's all your fault. Why didn't you let sleeping dogs lie? There are a million letters at least. What are we going to do about it?"

As I helped him deal with the mountain load, he said:

"An artist finds intense satisfaction in being told that he is a good cobbler or a good dish-washer."

Two honours pleased him more than any others: the Freedom of St. Pancras and the Freedom of Dublin.

"It proves that no man is born free. What on earth does a person do when he's free? I've never known what it is to be free and don't want to know. I'm like the prisoner who, being told by the governor that he is free, replied: 'Does it mean, gov', I'll now have to pay for being here?'"

G.B.S. was right. When he returned from London after receiving the Freedom of St. Pancras, he was walking with two sticks. I found him along the lane walking gingerly in our direction, sighing and groaning. It was a tragic set-back. We coaxed him into walking as if he were a child of one.

He told me that at Whitehall Court he had received an extraordinary request from a person of seventy. "Could I map out for him a course of reading in happy, optimistic literature; and suggest an itinerary where all the scenes were beautiful? The old man had had a life of struggle and achievement and now wanted to float amiably down the river to the sea of death. I told him to take up a course of study in a subject which needed hard grind and to stop reading novelettes and dreaming of the place round the corner. Old age is the beginning, not the end of life. I've only just begun to think about things. And I've discovered how right I was about everything. Put me down as that detestable creature: the man who was always right."

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"How did the man take your advice?" I asked.

"He must have written to twelve other people and have taken the advice that corresponded exactly with his intentions. Isn't that what is meant by freedom of worship? That's what I do with my doctors and solicitors."

## Chapter Six

WHATEVER his physical state, Shaw had the remarkable power of feigning good health and high spirits in the presence of an audience. He could put on any act expected of him. He could be the cavalier before a pretty girl, girl being any presentable female up to sixty; he could be the intellectual with a high contempt for love with an aged philosopher; he could be a crank with a socialite, and the most respectable of churchmen with a dean. He had an extensive repertoire and rarely brought out the wrong box of tricks. He came, he saw and he acted.

I suppose we were the only people before whom he was his real self and we could understand why he preferred to hide it from others.

He had come across a document written many years back by one of his 'flames'. He insisted on reading it to us as if he had prepared a defence.

"Shaw was, I should imagine, by preference a passionless man. He had passed through experiences and he seemed to have no wish for and even to fear passion though he admitted its power and pleasure. The sight of a woman deeply in love with him annoyed him. He was not in love with me, in the usual sense, or at any rate as he said only for a short time, and he found those times the pleasantest when I was the appreciative listener. Unfortunately on my side there was a deep feeling most injudiciously displayed. . . ."

He continued reading quite a long confessional which ended with a *Te Deum*:

"I acknowledge now that the hand of Providence with Shaw's consent and guidance intervened with good result on his behalf in warding off any possibility of a marriage with me."

G.B.S. took off his glasses, carefully placed them in his coat pocket, took them out again, put them on to see our faces all

the clearer and said: "Women have been a ghastly nuisance in my life. Do you think impotent people, as we are called, are sexless? We fall for women more passionately than the so-called normal creatures. Nature can be very cruel. I have been called a homo but that is not true. I had no sympathy with Edward Carpenter but I did not condemn him; I had, however, every sympathy with Ruskin."

He helped himself to a chocolate and found it too sticky for his dentures. "Like women, chocolates have a way of sticking when you want them to be pleasantly accommodating."

He took off his dentures, wiped off the sticky mess and placed them back again. "What was I saying? Women tend to regard love as a fusion of body, spirit and mind. It has never been so with me. Whenever I took the spirit of a woman in hand, she invariably took to drink; whenever I took the mind of woman in hand, she invariably went mad; whenever I took the body in hand, I went mad. All because I was inadequately equipped for love."

He slowly sipped a glass of milk and then said: "The years make no earthly difference. I still fall for women but they regard it as one of my jokes and tolerate me. Charlotte took it very nicely and bravely: she wept and poured out her soul to one or two young men. I did not interfere. It will all come out when I am dead. It has happened with Ruskin and it will happen with me: that is how they will brush me aside as they are all dying to do. I suppose I am an eligible widower with a huge fortune to leave to a young sorrowing wife. Have you heard any of these rumours in the village?"

"I rarely hear your name mentioned in the village. They leave you very much alone."

"Oh, I thought it was I who left them alone."

"Honours equal."

"They have only their chains to lose, I have the world and posterity," G.B.S. exclaimed, throwing his hands violently on his lap. And then with a mischievous twinkle: "No saint has ever found women so irresistible. There is Woman and there is the Life Force and I accept the fact without fuss even though it has been my life job to reconcile opposites."

He obviously expected similar confidences from us but to

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confide in him meant to broadcast one's life to the whole world. We had seen him, only too often, lapping up the creations of many a visitor, obviously invented to impress him. These he retailed with embellishments.

"When T. E. Lawrence and I got together we talked only about women because the only two he ever cared for were both quite old. But I kept off the subject with Hubert Bland and Frank Harris: they were love-bores. I can't stand people who are always dreaming of young girls."

"But you could stand Ruskin," I said.

"Ruskin was a saint, if ever there was one. So was William Morris, whose tragedy was that his beautiful wife loved Rossetti. I came upon the scene too late. It was a real joy to discuss the subject with Rodin when I sat for him."

G.B.S. smacked his lips and tried to recall Rodin's profound utterance.

"I've got it: 'Love was created by God to placate the Devil.' By the way, Rilke paid a wonderful tribute to Charlotte. Rilke, as you know, was Rodin's factotum. I had no idea then that he was such a great poet. He noticed that 'Charlotte played round her husband like a spring breeze playing through the fleece of a he-goat.' That describes our relationship exactly. I think Charlotte fell for that shy and shrinking young man: for some reason she had a special feel for unobtrusive people."

"Have you read Rilke?" I asked.

"No. Have you any of his poems handy? Rodin knew nothing of my work, he only knew me as the boorish husband of a charming lady. That's how he portrayed me and Charlotte loved it. She had me done again after she had refined me. I have photographs of the 'before' and 'after'."

I read from Rilke:

"'Again and again, however well we know the landscape of love  
And the little churchyard with its mournful names  
And the frightfully silent ravine in which the others  
End; and again and again we go out two together  
Under the old trees, make our couch once more  
Among the flowers, face to face with the sky.'"

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"In verse I am of the old-fashioned sort. I like it to rhyme. Why didn't he say:

'Again and again, however well the landscape of love we knew  
And the little churchyard with its mournful yew . . .'

"This craze for saying the first thing that comes into your head without rhyme or reason and calling it poetry does not impress me. In my plays there is not a word I have not brooded over until it expressed the exact meaning. The fact that they are in prose shows how much care I took over them. Poetry is far too glib for my liking. In this poem all Rilke wanted to say was that in spite of failure the Life Force tries, tries and tries again. Robert the Bruce was obviously the hero of the Life Force."

I handed the book to him and he glanced at the note preceding the poems.

"I see he comes from peasant stock and can claim kinship with nobility. How is it that every person of sensibility claims kinship with nobility? Even I have descended to that mean imposture. Although we were snubbed and cut dead by our titled relations, we boasted of them. Better to be the bastard son of a duke than a grandson of William Morris or Einstein. I remember once conversing with two considerable authors at the burial of Thomas Hardy in Westminster Abbey, when one suddenly stopped as if spellbound; 'That was Lord ——' he said in hushed tones."

He slowly turned the pages of the book, smiling as he glanced at this line and that, glancing as a passenger at the receding scenery. Suddenly he stopped and read aloud:

" 'School, School! The anguish and the weariness!  
The waiting and the downright stupid things!'

"That's exactly how I felt at school, the parent's conspiracy to torture the unwanted children. There are certain moments of my life which fill me with such horror that I wonder at my composure and sanity. As Swinburne said to me, 'It was a fore-taste of hell, a preparation for the life to come'."

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He grew very fidgety and we knew it was the news he wanted to hear. I switched on the wireless, he listened and sighed, and it was switched off again.

What was it he expected to hear that he listened in the morning, he listened in the afternoon and he listened three times in the evening? I have seen him change in the middle of a Mozart concert for another programme because there might be something of moment in the news. Did he expect to hear that the world had suddenly changed into the hygienic system he advocated or did he expect the doom of the world to be announced? Or was it to hear that another of his contemporaries had passed away? Or that the secret of longevity had been discovered? Or was it to hear his own name mentioned?

"One day I'll hear what I want to hear," he said.

"And what is that?" I asked.

He looked at me almost lovingly, and said: "That I am dead."

There was a silence and then he took out of his pocket an examination paper and read out a question set on his plays: "Discuss Bernard Shaw as a delincator of female character."

"This pompous question had to be answered by boys and girls of fifteen, I am given to understand. I couldn't answer it myself. What do they know of female character or male character? I'm probably ninety per cent female and the other one per cent or so male. Have you ever met a pure female? I haven't. Was St. Joan a female? All my characters are human beings; and what cannot be said of other dramatists: all the human beings are characters."



## *Chapter Seven*

NOT once did he ask us how we fared. He seemed to take us for granted, as he took the lane for granted and he took the sky for granted. When the lane was being repaired and the walk between our homes was impossible, he rang up and in an aggrieved tone suggested a viaduct between our two houses, a kind of tree walk, as he once saw in China. Only he did not think he could stand heights any longer. Perhaps a tunnel would do.

The repairing of the road interfered with his routine. However, he overcame this difficulty by climbing over the barbed wire at the bottom of the garden and walking down a narrow path. He came in looking triumphant but demanding a needle and cotton and the privacy of a room for a few minutes: his trousers had suffered in the adventure. When the all-clear was sounded he told us that it was a pity that all the troubles of the world could not be so easily adjusted.

"I have been advised that I need a new set of dentures. Without these artificial aids, man cannot live a natural life."

He showed us how ineffectual the present ones were and how he had to take them off when a film star insisted on sitting on his lap and kissing him.

"I didn't mind Ellen Terry calling me 'Silly' and Pat Campbell calling me 'Joey' but I do resent being called George. This lady asked me what she could do to make me happy. I asked her to pray for me. She said that she had never prayed in her life. And then she asked me to let her play St. Joan. She had heard that Pascal was going to do St. Joan and as she had never prayed in her life, except preyed on others, she was just the person for the part."

G.B.S. withheld the name of the film star from me but I think he was impressed by her flattery. From that moment she became one of his pin-up girls.

"She would never do for St. Joan because she is far too pretty. My St. Joan must be as beautiful as a farm wagon, not all bulge

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like an American car. She might do for Mrs. Warren when that is filmed, in fifteen, twenty years' time. I told her to come along then."

But he had really come to tell us that he had heard from a reliable source that the village was soon going to be flooded with pre-fabs. He described them with such enthusiasm that we thought that he himself was going to put up a couple in his own garden. The shelter was becoming intolerable because of the gnats and the wood lice.

"Who can afford the upkeep of a large house? Our progress has been so rapid that it is practically impossible to obtain food, clothing and shelter. We have created a world where it is a pain to exist. I notice my friend James Agate says that I have given myself to the construction of a world where only one per cent of the human race would want to live: a world without red meat, beer and cigarettes, where all people argue interminably round a table, refreshing themselves with a little grass and cold water. I am not given to prophecy, Inca, as you know, but I am willing to declare that I will outlive Agate by many years. He has given himself to permitting this hell on earth where not .01 per cent of the people want to live and where a lot of stupid statesmen are interminably arguing about peace when they mean war all the time."

G.B.S. was furious and a person overhearing would think that he was shouting at me 'with all his thirty mouths'.

"It's Agate who eats grass, for the red meat he boasts about was once a grass-eating animal. And as to his beer, what is it but disguised water? He thinks he is funny when he says that my world is full of harpies pursuing the potential fathers of their children, viragoes screaming that they are the votaries of the Life Force. Well, even that compares favourably with bombs pursuing the actual father of children, and mothers weeping because their sons had been taken off to the gas chambers. Let these clever people see what a hell they have permitted this earth to become. Will nothing wake them to the realization of what the world has become?"

There was defiance in his voice but when he stood up and saw his crumpled, toothless face in the mirror, he said: "How can

such an ugly biped dream dreams and see visions? I have been shouting for the human race to face up to facts but I see now that the worst fact of all is the stupidity of the human. I know why Shakespeare and Swift were so bitter."

This mood did not persist. He glanced at a painting and his faith was restored. There were certain magical tokens that renewed his will to live and art was one of them. It was obvious that his humour and vitality sprang from this continuous renewal.

He had built up bulwarks against declining faith and on the whole they stood up against horror and decay. He extolled old age and hated it. "What do you want with an old man?" he asked of us. "You should both leave this humble village fit only for sheep and birds and old men. Go where the world is still young, if such a place is still to be found."

His eyes twinkled as they roamed the world and returned without such a discovery.

"But we do not consider you old. We are unaware of the years between us. At a certain point age no longer counts."

"Yes," he said pleadingly, "it does matter. It matters because young people do not like the old: it reminds them of the desolation awaiting them. There are two things we do not like to be reminded of, infancy and old age. Luckily for me there is not a soul in the world who can pat me on the back and say: 'Ah. I knew you when you were five months old and you haven't changed a bit.'"

I seemed to see a wink behind his deep concern for us.

He was kept desperately busy answering the host of articles on himself. There were so many facts to correct. He had to inform this person that he was born on the respectable side of the river and not on the bad side. "The Savoy Hotel may not be very far from Waterloo Road but there are astral distances between them, and so is the social distance between the left bank and the right bank in Dublin," he pointed out.

And then there was the subtle difference between being a Land Agent and an estate agent. "The class difference was terrific. I was the better class."

There was so much underlining, crossing out and marginal noting that his fingers were bloody with red ink.

### *Shaw's Corner*

"I have written so much about myself that they cannot see the trees for the leaves, and as to the roots, they are smothered by the dead gold."

He showed me a letter to James Agate he had mapped out, but felt it lacked punch.

"I'm getting far too reasonable in my old age; all sage and no rage."

"My dear Agate,

What is your religion? It demands the old sacrifices of red meat and red wine, and so I take it that you are a cannibal. There is no flesh left on my aged body to consume, so bury it without fuss instead of dancing and howling lustful incantations. One day you may live like a man and then you will understand another.

G.B.S."

"The letter won't do. Agate is a very good man and the last thing I want to do is to hurt him. We are worlds apart and that is all there is to it. I should never have been a writer, even though it has given me a fine house, good clothes and enough to eat. . . ."

He told me in his inimitable way, enacting each part, a story told to him by Andrew Carnegie, "the man who made it so difficult for authors to make a living because of the Public Libraries established with his money".

A runaway negro was brought before a judge and this is what took place:

*Judge:* "So you have run away from Kentucky. Bad master, I suppose?"

*Slave:* "Oh no, Judge; very good kind massa."

*Judge:* "He worked you too hard?"

*Slave:* "No, sah."

*Judge:* "He did not give you enough to eat?"

*Slave:* "Plenty to eat."

*Judge:* "He did not clothe you well?"

*Slave:* "Good enough clothes for me, Judge."

## *Shaw's Corner*

*Judge*: "You hadn't a comfortable home?"

*Slave*: "Makes me cry to think of my little cabin."

*Judge*: "Then why did you leave?"

*Slave*: "I was impelled, sah."

*Judge*: "Nonsense."

*Slave*: "Well, Judge, I lef de situation down ther open. You kin go rite down and get it."

"I know how Tolstoy felt when he left all and wanted to die in a ditch. You'll probably find me lying in one, one day. A good many people have died of simple horror, mercifully without quite knowing it."

"Does it matter very much where one dies?" I asked.

"There are pleasant and unpleasant ways of dying as of living. Lying in a ditch is rather cold and lonely, don't you think?"

"It's certainly not as warm and homely as dying in one's bed," I said, treating the subject lightly, for I could not think of G.B.S. dying.

"I know exactly how I'll die. I've been through it more than once."

He did not tell me and I certainly did not press him to tell me.

"Take my advice, Inca, don't permit earth burial. The flame is more fitting for the human soul."

I told of a village funeral which I had seen that very day and it looked as if the bearers were sleep-walking while the person in the coffin was going home, quietly and happily.

Within a moment his mood changed. It was only a mood.

"This one true thing you have said in your article on me is that God has given me everything but the one thing I wanted. As I hadn't the benefit of the integrating force of painting, I ran amuck. My humour springs from the fact that I was released from the one thing I cared about. It's like a husband losing his wife: at first he is disconsolate, but suddenly he discovers that he is free to say what he likes, do what he likes, but he doesn't like anything."

"My article gave you no offence?"

"You didn't fall into the current fashion of attributing my

### *Shaw's Corner*

mature thought to some flimsy experience as a babe. You see me on the way *to* somewhere not *from* somewhere. It is time there was a new creation compounded of bird, beast and man. I am sure the biologists are at work on such a being. The two important things we should aim at is that the new creation should have vision as well as sight and that the sexual and urinary organs should be separate. The latter was a terrible oversight by an omniscient creator. If the biologist is not an artist the resultant creation will be as lopsided as the crocodile and the hippopotamus. I'm introducing a crocodile into my new play."

I wanted to know all about it.

"Male or female?" I asked.

"Oh, just a crocodile with a fondness for sentimental music, like Karl Marx. I've always had a soft spot for crocodiles. I must have been one in my last incarnation, not that I believe in such a thing as incarnation."

"What made you become a man?"

"Probably because I swallowed one. That's why I found it so easy to become a vegetarian. I warn all meat-eaters that they will become the very animals they consume. As a matter of fact I see it happening already."

## *Chapter Eight*

**A**FTER walking round our garden and admiring our roses, which were particularly beautiful that year, he settled down under the willows and we loved him when he rambled on inconsequentially. It was like the ripple of a stream or the wind in the wood. His voice had the same, soothing, melodious quality, the same meaningless significance. His mind brushed lightly on everything, causing only the faintest quiver of the emotions, saying so much and yet nothing. It was a warm autumn afternoon and we were held as in a dream by the sunlight.

"You don't know how gratified I am that you take notice of me," he said. "As gratified as when a bird or horse takes notice of me. I've become a naturalized villager."

He told of a journalist who had been wandering for hours round Welwyn trying to find Shaw's Corner.

"Agate?"

"No, a rough diamond. He ultimately rang up from Hertford and asked me where I was. 'At home, R.I.P.' 'Your place is the most elusive place on earth,' he answered. 'It is Ervine St. John, isn't it?' 'No, Shaw St. Bernard,' I shouted, and put down the receiver."

"I've never known of a journalist not getting where he wants and what he wants."

"He was pulling my leg, as the thief said when the bulldog got hold of his trousers. They ought to institute a new Order, the Order of Solitude, open to one person only and with a status a little above royalties. When the House of Lords was very unpopular, I suggested as an alternative a House of Seers but Wells was afraid that it would be known as the Sewerage and so I dropped the idea in case I was the first to be granted a Sewerage."

Within a few days, G.B.S. came forward with a wonderful solution to the problem of finding his house. He would incorporate the name of the house into the design of the gate. It

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would not only make the gate taller and more imposing but it would proclaim who was resident there. SHAW'S CORNER.

"Don't you think, G.B.S., it will be a fearful waste putting up the name on the gate if your new alphabet will make it appear old-fashioned and cumbersome?"

Once he had made up his mind there was no stopping him.

"It will fit nicely into the Shaw Museum of Antiquities which my house will soon become. Archacologists will one day decipher the inscription and will understand why the man who had to sign his name more often than any man in the world fought to get the four letters reduced to two. Not a single Cholmondeley or Beauchamp or Cirencester came to his aid. He fought a single-handed fight and won, but only after devoting his huge fortune to it. Do you think a soul will visit the museum? I loathe museums."

We got talking about Charlotte and he was amused at my efforts at portraying her.

"It's of no use, Inca, you'll never get her. I've tried more than once and had to give it up. Derivative fame is extremely difficult to put across. I don't remember a single wife of a great man who interested me. You see, these women marry fame and not the person and so remain single. Of all the women I have known, and I have known many, I knew Charlotte least of all. She married me as a gay heretic and immediately set about converting me into a figure of unimpeachable respectability, as if a respectable person could ever write a play of mine."

"She was never at home in Ayot St. Lawrence."

"She was never at home anywhere. No woman ever is. There is always a happy home far far away. I don't pretend to understand women and I comfort myself with the thought that I didn't marry a Shavian one."

The Indian summer remained with us for a considerable period and he was able to get out a great deal. He was so high-spirited and sprightly that we feared for his health; surely such an old body could never contain such exuberance and survive. We admired a certain bush in his front garden and pointed to it:

"I've been wanting to ask the name of it for the last ten years. When Rodin wanted to know anything he asked the post-



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man, the man of letters, but I dare not reveal my ignorance about the most familiar things. They already consider me the village idiot down here."

The crisp air was so inviting that we walked on down the all-familiar lane, followed by playful autumn leaves. I told how when I went for an all-night walk, I felt I was being followed only to find it was a leaf dogging my footsteps.

"You must have been disappointed," G.B.S. said. "What on earth made you walk through the night?"

"The wonder of it," I replied.

"Oh, I thought you suffered from insomnia. I sleep very soundly, like a parrot tied to a cage."

A labourer was returning home from the local and immediately hid his cigarette as he saw us approaching.

"Did you notice that, Inca?" there was a thrill in his voice. "He knows that I loathe smoking. Homage to the village idiot."

We had not gone far before there was the report of a gun. A bird fell before our feet.

"May I have my bird, sir?" The labourer demanded.

"Your bird?" G.B.S. asked.

"Yes, sir. I shot it just now."

"And if you shot me, would you claim possession of my body?"

The labourer was taken aback.

We did not permit him to have the bird, but covered it with dead leaves. Our walk was spoiled for us and we returned.

"The pessimists have the best of every argument," G.B.S. said. "I sometimes wonder how hope persists in spite of everything pointing to the contrary. It's because we are fools. As long as there are fools in the world there will be hope."

As there was a pervasive aroma of tobacco in his sitting room he asked me to come into the dining room.

"I will show you my new electric fire. As I will not have coal fires any more since they require a lot of work, I have spent a fortune on this." He boasted of its weight. I shuddered when he lifted it.

"All your work of wood cutting in vain," I said.

"This will be a change: I can switch on the fire whenever I

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need it and I can move it about instead of having to sit next to a fire which turns to ash."

I felt he would miss the intimacy of the wood fire and remembered how he loved stroking it with his outstretched hands. Well, he would still have the comfort of a wood fire at our place.

"Are you doing anything this evening?" he asked.

There was always the same answer to this question.

"Then come round soon after dinner. There is nothing on the wireless tonight except a play of mine and I do not want to listen to that. Do you?"

As a matter of fact, I did want to listen to it, but I did not say so because I knew that when the moment arrived he would be listening as intently as though he was hearing it for the first time, laughing at the jokes and often criticizing as if it had been written by someone else.

When I came in after dinner the wireless was gushing forth loud and wild dance music, noisy enough to set the whole village dancing, while he sat fast asleep, head fallen forward helplessly. I switched off and he woke at once, opening his eyes in wonder as if surprised to return from a long journey. When he became aware of the silence he switched on at once.

"I think there was something I wanted to hear."

"It isn't on for another half-hour at least," I answered.

"Right-o, then we can talk."

The wireless would have drowned a waterfall but he insisted on having it on. Luckily I am one of those who can cut off noise at will and even sleep in gunfire. I heard G.B.S. saying: "It is extraordinary how a despicable character and physically repulsive attracts the loveliest women." I thought this was a reference to myself but it was Aveling this time.

"His wife, Elcanor, the daughter of Karl Marx, was extremely attractive and was more of this generation than of the dark age in which I lived. I used to see her at the British Museum and was too shy to approach her. Both of us were rather on the conventional side."

Then his voice was drowned by a crescendo of drum and brass; he stopped talking and his eyes glowed with pleasure as he conducted the invisible band.

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"I have never understood why music lovers split up into opposing sides of string and wind. I can enjoy both and it was left to me to defend the Salvation Army Festival of Noise against the high-brow music critic."

The music stopped and we naturally fell into a quieter note.

"Why do people come to me," he asked, "and tell me of the splendid meals they have consumed, consisting of all the things I have discarded in my youth? Have they no respect for my principles? They must think me a huge hoax."

He winked with amusement and brought his head up proudly erect. "I try to live decently and not a soul takes notice. If I, however, were elbowed into the gutter from the strait path the whole world would shout with triumph."

There was not a hint of self-pity in this statement but on the contrary, it was a spiritual challenge, a defiance.

"I wanted to get this off my chest and I feel the better for it."

After the broadcast of his play through which he slept most of the time he said: "It is only lately I have come to realize how attractive I was to females. I was shockingly ugly in the years when most men are attractive, with my red nose and rude tongue."

I thought this a very modest description of himself when thirty. "It was easy in those days to impose on people with words," I said.

He smiled. "Even Carlyle married, even George Eliot. Most men marry because they need a professional flatterer in the house to give them confidence and bolster them up. Charlotte would not hear a word against me, though it took me a long time to make her realize that everything I said was right and I tried to act up to her good opinion of me by saying in public what she told me in private. How do you feel when I am attacked?"

"It depends on the kind of attack. You, who have attacked everybody in turn, can surely take it?"

"That is where you are wrong. I have brought out more people than anybody on earth. Who brought out Ibsen, who brought out Wagner, who brought out Butler?" then, with a disarming smile, "and who brought out the greatest of all of them, Bernard Shaw?"

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"I dragged you away from your home," he went on, "all because I suddenly grew afraid of myself and feared my own company, but I was all right again by the time you came. You see, I have the gift of carrying on conversations with imaginary people or with friends who are not present. A depression never stays long over Shawland."

This was not the first time that he had expressed a dread of his own company.

"Have you seen how they are advertising *Caesar and Cleopatra* in America?"

He showed me a full page advertisement of the film with Caesar and Cleopatra in passionate embrace. It read:

'Never before such seductive beauty, such riotous, luxurious loving and living!'

"I'll go down as the greatest pornographic writer of the nineteenth century, if I'm not careful. And yet I am as ignorant as Havelock Ellis and Freud in such things. I don't suppose any of us could utter an obscene word without feeling thoroughly degraded. All the young people come to me to solve their love problems and I am accused of filling the young with the noblest ideas but never telling them how to do 'it'. The young know more about 'it' than I do."

We were walking in the most desolate of woods, very slowly, of course, and his body was shaped like a huge question mark. He said:

"I'm one of the few men who can talk to a woman without sex intervening. Chastity is the most intimate form of intercourse."

We groped our way beneath trees and crawled for some distance like feeble quadrupeds until we came into the open light. He banged a young birch with his stick and raised his voice so high that many birds went fluttering from their silent trees.

"I notice," I said, "that you have got into the habit of beating trees. There is such a thing as retribution."

The thought of retribution amused him and he laughed aloud. "I see everything double," he answered. "I have to beat the one which isn't there out of the way. My father saw double and I must have appeared to him as an identical twin. When

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Oscar Wilde's father operated on him for it, he said: 'My dear Shaw, if I cure you, you'll need double the income to buy half of what you get now.' I asked Oscar years later to explain this strange arithmetic. He answered: 'My father thought he was being funny but there was never a trace of humour in my family. You and I must have been changed when we were born.' "

"I've noticed," I said, "that humourists always think that nobody else has a sense of humour."

"The best kind of humour is only a defensive weapon against the sadistic impulse of the mob. If it weren't for my comedic sense, I'd have been crucified long ago. Instead I have the largest audience in the world and I can say what I like when I like. The more serious I am, the more they laugh. Nobody laughs when Beethoven's Ninth is played, why do they laugh when I play my ninetieth?"

## *Chapter Nine*

**G** B.S. did not blame the Labour government for the fiercest of all winters. He felt like Dr. W. G. Grace who, when asked how he felt when he saw the stump down answered: "I feel just like the stump, but I got the century."

G.B.S. hadn't quite got the century and he was finding the bowling a little tricky. When I went in I said: "I'll be seeing you when a hundred yet." He eyed me critically and answered: "Yes, you look quite good for another fifty years."

He told me that the weather brought up memories only of meetings: open-air meetings in summer, stuffy indoor meetings and long train journeys in winter.

"I was a gramophone record perpetually talking, talking, and nobody knew how to turn the beastly thing off. I have nightmares of hecklers putting unanswerable questions and myself looking askance at the jeering crowd. It never happened like that but in dream it always does. How I must have hated these meetings!"

"Did you do things you hated?"

"I was only drawn to the things I hated. I never recall a moment of peace except when I was in a Chinese temple away from it all. Western civilization is fundamentally unsound, but then all civilization is. Don't you think the atom bomb has something to do with this fearful weather?"

Hardly had he put this question when he recalled equally ferocious weather when he walked from St. Pancras to Linchouse sixty years back to address a meeting. "I remember the heat and stench of the unventilated hall, hundreds of unemployed had come to hear what I had to say about it. I made them laugh with the same kind of jokes that made Mayfair laugh."

He laughed as he recalled the jokes of the day. The winter of 1886 he remembered as if it were yesterday. He could hear himself saying to the pathetically patient audience: 'We may as well live idle as starve working. I am a loafer and a scoundrel and we're all in the game together.'

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"The formula fitted both classes," G.B.S. remarked.

Our electric pump was not functioning owing to the bursting of a pipe. As there was no water in the house I had to go every few hours to get some in a pail. The subject cropped up in conversation and I told G.B.S. that the engineer had promised at last to get the job done in a week. He laughed heartily at the thought and I felt that if it made him so happy it should not matter to us if the engineer took a month over the job.

"How on earth do you get your water?" he asked.

I told him.

"We had the pump seen to before the frost set in," he said. "Our water pump hasn't let us down. I don't know what I'd do if it did."

"We're all in the game together," I said, recalling his words.

"It's wicked, Inca, wicked. Last night the wireless stopped dead in the middle of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto. I was thinking if I had my life over again I'd like to play the accompaniment to it. So if there is another life where all wishes are at last fulfilled, then you can look forward to a wonderful performance. Only I also wanted to be one of the anonymous singers in the Ninth, so there will be grave difficulties in the metamorphosis. Have you any unfulfilled wishes, Inca?"

"No more war."

"I know, I know," G.B.S. said. "The impossible is the only practical solution to all our troubles. Don't take this nightmare of a world too seriously. I was like that once but I've learnt to laugh since. I used to feel when I was writing plays or listening to music that I wasn't doing my bit for the world but now I don't mind indulging in play-playing." Then, as in a fit of absent-mindedness, he asked me how I managed to keep warm.

"By going for a ten-mile walk every day," I answered unconvincingly.

"This no-water business came as a God-send. Getting your water must keep you warm. As I can't walk, I have had to think of other ways of keeping warm. I have noticed that by recalling certain people I get amazingly warm, the most unexpected people. My father, for example. He really cared for me. Lee was the more dynamic, the more dramatic character and I can quite

understand my mother following him, but my father understood me better. He was not demonstrative. If I believed in spiritualism I'd say he was always following me about and guarding me from my worst indiscretions. It's awfully strange about spiritualism, even if all the evidence is in its favour, I can't get interested in it. Show me something where all the evidence is against it and at once I am converted."

He looked up at the drawing of himself by De Smet.

"That must be a very good portrait of me because it is so much like my father."

As if from another world, we heard a voice declaiming poetry. The electricity had been restored after a drastic power-cut and the wireless started on its own account:

"Must be one of the young contemporary poets, it's so old-fashioned. In my young days it was 'wine and women' now it's all whine. Switch it off."

I caught one or two lines, however, and asked him to listen.

"I refuse," G.B.S. insisted. "These people have had the benefit of my work and they refuse to learn. Let them go to the blazes. I had no Shaw to help me."

"They've had the benefit of a war," I said.

"War has a wonderful literature and tradition, but I knew poverty, a barren field which ultimately yielded immortal plays. These people are expressing themselves and they have no self to express: they are in a line with Chaucer and Tennyson."

They were found guilty and dismissed. Seeing that his pronouncement had not the desired result, he said:

"Give me Langland. His *Piers the Plowman* is a terrible witness to the fact that in the midst of all the tale-telling and merriment, there was even then a skeleton in the cupboard in the form of deep suffering and discontent. I'll shock you, Inca. Sir Walter Scott is a favourite of mine and I am glad to hear that Sidney Webb has just discovered him."

"You feel that Sidney Webb is a good judge of literature?"

"Oh yes, he doesn't care for any of my plays."

The electric heater made the room insufferably hot and stuffy.

In spite of the promise of the engineers, they did not arrive



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because they could not get the petrol to reach our forsaken village. No spot on earth could have looked more forlorn than Ayot Saint Lawrence; the baker could not deliver and the grocer found it unapproachable.

"The best thing is to think it isn't happening," G.B.S. advised. "The moment the cold goes, and it has a way of going before the summer is out, you'll forget that it ever happened, so why not take time by the forelock and forget now?"

"I have already forgotten," I answered, to dismiss the subject.

"You see, Inca, you have a great advantage over me. You *can* see ahead. I *daren't*. I can't see beyond death. Death to me is negation. That is why I never think about it although it is ever-present. I abhor a vacuum. I did not create life and I did not create lack of life. I watch it as I watch the sea or a mountain. I am of life and outside life. I can be outside it because I know that I shall die. If it were not for death I might have got tied up with life and never have been able to extricate myself. I am dead and life is the robin that doesn't know it."

He said this in a quiet matter-of-fact voice as if he had no feelings about the matter.

"You are one of the few who have lived," I said.

"Well, I have met Mozart and Michelangelo. Not bad for a few years of existence. And there were moments even in my uneventful existence."

It was not for me to say a word. The silence that followed was more communicative than speech. He tried to rise from his seat but fell back helplessly. By a great effort of will he rose again and this time remained standing for a few seconds but he complained that the room was spinning round like a top and that he was the only stationary object.

"I have given much pain, especially to those I cared for most. My friends could not have feared me more than I feared myself," he said as he settled himself comfortably before another effort. "The strange thing is that the people to whom I have been most cruel regard me as the kindest of immortals. The reason is obvious: a crumb from a brute is as manna in hell."

This time he stood up and felt perfectly normal in that posture, laughing at his feebleness and enjoying his power.

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"I don't suppose I could have made a better job of life than God," he said. "There are obvious defects, in fact each thing in itself is a defect and an eyesore. There is not an organ of mine that works efficiently. I remember my sister once patiently undoing a whole knitted dress because there was a flaw in it and then reknitting it. 'Oh dear,' she exclaimed, when it was completed, 'I've made the same mistakes all over again.' Please don't think I have given up all hope for the world: God must have regarded me as a useful experiment. I'd like to have a peep at His notes before I am given over to the flames."

"You were co-operative," I suggested.

"As much as human beings can be co-operative. We're not much. I once had a secretary who was extremely co-operative. When my work came back to me I didn't recognize it. It was no doubt much better than the original but I was obstinate enough to prefer my own."

When I returned to my home I received a message that a friend's car had stuck two miles away and it would be fatal to leave it out all night in the frost. He had rung up G.B.S. and was told that he could do nothing about it. He advised them to wait till the thaw set in. When I ultimately reached the marooned car I found the party in gay spirits while one of them retailed the conversation on the phone with G.B.S., whose voice seemed to have had a tonic effect on his auditors.

The thaw set in at last and things were much worse than with the static frost: everything now was on the move: the lanes were torrents and the fields were lakes. G.B.S. had to point out how ill-equipped we were for this forlorn world.

"I'll be glad to go," he said. "Living has never done a soul any good. The fact is that when the earth was created the eliminative process was overlooked: the world is clogged up with obsolete ideas and morals and there is no way of getting rid of them. I suppose that is why we call the accumulating litter—litterature. I acted as the much needed purgative but it hasn't worked."

He enjoyed the pun and repeated it.

"When I was younger," G.B.S. added, "I used to get very depressed but it was only necessary for me to remain silent and

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a still small voice lifted my spirits. Now when I sit quite still  
I fall asleep. Even Coué doesn't work with me any longer.

'This very remarkable young man  
Commends a most practical plan;  
You can do what you want  
If you don't think you can't  
But don't think you can't think you can.' "

G.B.S. wished that in all his buccaneering raids on ideas, that they were expressed as succinctly as in this limerick. In most cases the ideas he brought back with him were so ill-expressed that he had to put them into his own words and so claim them as his own.

"Most people are convinced that when I am alone I stand on my head and write with my toes. It does not occur to them that it is the world that is upside down. Because I prefer to see things as they are, they regard me as a crank."

"I rarely hear the word 'crank' now. Perhaps it is because we are all cranks."

"Gandhi never minded being called a crank but he objected most strongly to being called a 'nigger' as I'd object to being called a 'snigger'."

"How did you get on together?"

"When I was a boy, I used to go to a tunnel and shout my name aloud and hear it come back to me. I went whenever I could and each time shouted louder. At a certain point it came back a little less distinct and so I learnt the law of maximum return. With Gandhi a whisper was enough."

"He was one of the few men with whom one could remain silent," I said.

"There were only two people with whom I could remain completely silent: with Charlotte because I had exhausted all I had to say; with the Webbs because I was kept too busy to talk. With all others while there was life there was dope."

I thought that he might have included us among those with whom he could remain silent. Although we ranged over every subject, we never forced conversation and very often we sat

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silently reading or listening to the wireless together. He never felt the need to entertain us and we did not worry if he remained completely silent even with visitors present. I remember once a visitor from Ireland coming with the express purpose of hearing his remarkable conversation and we all enjoyed a silent hour in the garden.

"There is one thing about prison, you are not thought unsociable when you do not talk," I said to G.B.S. when the visitor left.

"Oscar Wilde almost fainted with joy when a fellow prisoner addressed him in the prison yard," G.B.S. informed me. "I'd have given anything to have paced the exercise ground behind him, like a dog following a master."

More than once I found G.B.S. pacing his room like a prisoner, deliberately, silently, like one cast adrift.

"I was stopped outside the inn and was asked whether it was open," G.B.S. remarked.

"Of course it's open, unless the beer runs out."

"I went up with the thirsty one and looked in through the window and was never so surprised in my life. There were a lot of children in the place."

"Oh, the Sunday School is held in the pub," I explained.

"Everything is upside down here: Sunday schools in pubs, and a heretic like myself living in the Rectory. Was there ever a village like it? The other day a person rang and asked to see the Rector. I happened to be near and when the man saw me he ran as from a plague. I must have shown him the demoniacal side of my face. The other side is really quite benign."

## *Chapter Ten*

**G**. B.S. could display astonishing powers of vocal mimicry. He threatened to become a psychic medium, if his other powers dried up. He could take off any voice from Annie Besant to Dr. Clifford, from the lisping Webb to the blustering Aveling, from the husky Ellen Terry to the sophisticated Mrs. Campbell. His repertoire was wide and he amused us often by calling upon them to entertain us. He was at his best when he brought forward incompatibles and made them converse on subjects they knew nothing about.

I was just entering his room when I heard myself talking. So that was how I sounded to him. It was a queer and haunting experience, for he went on after he was aware of my presence. He certainly wasn't mocking me: it was just an objective analysis of sound.

"I refrain from shooting," G.B.S. declared, "because the first person I would shoot if I carried the necessary weapon would undoubtedly be myself, because my own accent is that of a finicky old maid. When I hear ugly speech I am driven to murder."

He told me that this was the day when he visited his barber and that I would not recognize him when he returned. "How I hate the winding lanes. It's a long lane which is all turning. I could get back in half the time. What would you think of an aeroplane zigzagging in the sky when it had to get somewhere important? That's what my car has to do on our wretched winding lanes. Time is the most important factor with me. Every minute is worth a pound."

"Then why not get a barber to come to you? It would save an hour at least."

"What and pay double for a haircut! Not likely."

"You should bring up the question of our lanes at the next Parish Meeting."

"Who listens to the village idiot? I'm just the fellow who lives at Shaw's Corner and cultivates corns on my hindquarters."

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The only thing they know about me is that I buy more stamps than the rest of the village put together. They no doubt conclude that I must be always writing letters to myself. In the good old illiterate days I might have become the village letter writer."

"They would never have confided in you, G.B.S."

"Oh yes, they have always confided in me, but I have invariably discovered that what they told me was false. I have noticed that I induce lying in the most truthful of people. You, Inca, have never told me a thing about yourself. A good bout of lying does a world of good. It liberates the soul. People go away from me looking reinvigorated and inspired. When I discovered my genius for it, I joined the Fabian Society."

He waited for this fact to sink in.

"The Fabian Society was a fact-finding club and the more facts we found, the more convinced we were that society was a lie and its basic institutions fraudulent. The more rein I gave to my lying propensity, the faster I got to the truth. That is why Cowper's 'John Gilpin' has always been one of my favourite poems:

'His horse, who never in that sort  
Had handled been before,  
What thing upon his back had got  
Did wonder more and more. . . .'

Once I mounted the Fabian mare, I scattered in all directions.

'Away went Gilpin, neck or nought;  
Away went hat and wig!  
He little dreamt, when he set out,  
Of running such a rig.'"

"So you think, G.B.S., that the battle of Socialism was won in the drawing rooms of London?"

"No. In the theatres of the world. I am the intellectual cuckoo; I laid my eggs in the theatres of the world and got the managers to hatch them for me. As they turned out to be golden eggs, there was no objection."

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He changed his voice almost to a whisper. "Something dreadful has happened," he declared.

My mind conjured up a host of dreadful things from a burst water-pipe to a damaged typewriter, from the death of a friend to the flight of a maid, from the loss of a manuscript to the collapse of his shelter. But happily it was none of these. I should have seen from the look on his face that the 'dreadful thing' was not as tragic as all that.

"Yesterday when I was talking to a member of the household I heard that a crank, a real live crank, had moved into a house within ten miles of here."

"Good, then you will have agreeable company at last," I said.

"I've ordered the staff to keep him out of the house. I'm going to have a 'Private' notice put up at once."

"But he may be far too busy and considerate to worry an old man," I suggested.

"He may think he is entertaining me, that I am a poor lonely man in need of company. I'm not lonely and I can do without company. It wouldn't matter very much if I didn't see a soul for the rest of my life."

"Why cross a bridge before you get to it?" I asked.

"I'll see that there are no bridges to cross. He will be refused admittance to my house."

"Why get excited about something that will not happen? He is ten miles away, you say."

"All cranks gravitate to my place. In the village this is known as 'Crank's Corner'. I'm not going to become a laughing stock. And I am going to get him out of the place as soon as possible. I don't want him here."

"Have you seen him?" I asked.

"I've been told all about him."

"You ought to know better than accept the crumbs collected at the tea parties."

"Crumbs, you call them. Cottage loaves! The man has thirteen children and judging by the exclamations of his parrots, his language is not too good."

More and more information came to him from his 'secret

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service' and he passed on all he knew to me. It was much worse than he had imagined.

None of the children had ever been sent to school! he informed me.

"Looks like a disciple of yours," I said.

"Round his walls are prints of the artist philosophers Nietzsche, Ruskin, Morris, Wagner, Goethe, Ibsen. . . . The first thing he'll do is to ask me for a photograph of myself. The least among equals."

His plaint took a different turn when days passed and weeks passed and the 'crank' did not enter an appearance.

"I suppose he expects the mountain to come to Mahomet. If it does he will learn what is meant by a volcanic eruption. I understand his name is Stanley. 'Mr. Shaw, I presume.'"

When I told G.B.S. that I had met the man and found him a hardworking craftsman, too poor to send his children to the Public School and too proud to send them to the Public elementary school, he was shocked.

"And what about those prints round his room?" he asked.

"His walls were whitewashed and bare."

"Well, the man is wise in not giving his children any schooling. Unskilled labour is in such great demand that the illiterate is worth his weight in gold. Universal education has put a premium on ignorance."

"You ought to call on him just to show you have no ill-feeling," I said.

"Why should I have any ill-feeling?" G.B.S. answered. "I can't afford the luxury."

I called his attention to the scene from my window. A fall of snow had converted the weeping willows into laughing cherry trees.

"Like all pretty things, it is a damned nuisance."

The lane between our homes was the steepest in the immediate neighbourhood and the boys and girls used it for sliding and sledging. We hugged the hedge and as the snow fell on the beard of G.B.S. he sucked it in.

"I love the taste of snow. I used to bathe in it when I was a boy," he said.



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A snowball came hurtling towards him and fell on his white head. Immediately G.B.S. bent down and gathered enough snow to return the compliment but his reach was not as far as his intention and it went straight into my face. I congratulated him on his marksmanship.

I told G.B.S. that Flora Robson was coming down to see us and it would be nice if he could come in.

"It will give me an excuse for coming to you. I must think of one or two new stories to infuriate her. A girl with a voice like a dove should stop playing horrid characters and do somebody soft and soothing. It's the pretty ones who have hard metallic voices: they give themselves away on the wireless. I could really listen to Flora for hours."

But he didn't listen to Flora for hours. It was she who listened to him.

## *Chapter Eleven*

WHEN the weather improved at last, he suggested a drive round the neighbourhood. Pleasure driving was forbidden and so we had to think out a formula in case we were stopped by the police. We could not pretend we were going shopping because there were no shops in the pretty lanes; we could not pretend that our work took us in that direction, then what were we doing in those 'foreign parts' using up precious petrol? G.B.S. suggested that we should say that we were just breaking the law. The publicity obtained would be worth the term of hard labour.

"If you tell the truth, nobody will believe you," he said.

We had the lanes practically to ourselves.

"As far away from Ayot as possible. The bird is free from its cage," G.B.S. cried.

The car could not go fast enough for him. Was it the ghost of Lawrence of Arabia that haunted him? He told of his young friend's mania for speed and confessed that the demoniacal motor cycle which led to his death was provided by him.

"It was like handing a pistol to a would-be suicide," he said.

It was so difficult to go fast along the narrow winding lanes that G.B.S. was asking for destruction.

"I always found fast driving much safer than slow. I have half a mind to take over the wheel myself. Only I haven't renewed my licence."

He praised the Russian roads where a speed of ninety miles was considered pedestrian.

"Every child in Russia is born with the lust for work and speed." He hoped that this argument would urge the car to renew its own lust.

When we got back at last he chuckled and walked slowly and with faltering footstep to the back of his house.

I must have hurt him, unwittingly, of course, for he did not

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come in for many weeks and I did not feel inclined to visit Shaw's Corner.

Then, one day, I heard the loud rat-tat again and was glad to hear it. He told me at once that he wanted to talk very seriously to me and I feared that he had had another bout of constipation. That was the first thought that came to me.

"You laughed when I referred to Russia in that motor outing," he began almost solemnly.

"That you should praise the lust for speed and work amused me," I said.

"I know what you mean, the transformation of a slow lazy people into a hardworking purposeful community seems incredible. Economic necessity is the mother of intention: they pulled themselves into the new type."

"Solidarity through liquidation," I said.

"Don't play with clever retort. It is unworthy of you. I never do it. Leave out the liquidation and let us concentrate on the solidarity. What do a few lives matter when great issues are involved? I am probably the only humanitarian left in the world but a humanitarian must look at the world dispassionately, must be prepared to throw over the greater for the lesser, as a millionaire must sometimes give up a Rolls and go by bus, if that is the only way to get to a place."

The approach was not new to me and I must have shown a little impatience.

"We're always giving up the greater for the lesser," he again urged. "I gave up painting, the greatest of all arts for drama."

"You have remained G.B.S. and therefore gave up nothing."

"One can be a spiritual miser, you know, and hoard beliefs, as the pawnbroker hoards dress suits. A belief or two may be necessary as a stock-in-trade or for window-dressing but when moving to a new shop, it is wise to start afresh."

"Are your beliefs just window-dressing, G.B.S.?"

"You're a sanctimonious humbug, Inca. You will not see the 'would' for the 'is'. I can see beyond the 'is' and that is the difference between us. The Industrial Revolution brought slums and poverty in its wake but the machine is liberating the human being from drudgery and poverty. You are like the village yokel

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who stared at me writing and said he'd prefer digging; he did not see the mind behind the writing. He saw the writing on the paper while I saw the Writing on the Wall."

"And what does the Writing say?"

"Change or go under."

He was extremely disappointed that I was not caught in the web of his spinning.

"There's something else I want to talk to you about. You saw the *Caesar and Cleopatra* film in the making and you have seen the columns of invective poured on the final thing. I've been thinking about it. There, again, they wanted nothing less than perfection and would not make allowance for an imperfect medium. My plays are not for the eye but for the mind. You can feast the eye with blue skies, yellow sands, pyramids and bazaars, but one sentence of mine is as good as any visual feast."

"*Caesar and Cleopatra* should have been attempted as a silent film."

"Oh, is that what you think of my writing? And would you like *St. Joan* as a silent film?"

"I could not imagine anything more moving," I answered.

"The strange thing is that every girl with a pair of sparkling eyes and a winsome body thinks herself the ideal *St. Joan*. I want the ugliest possible young woman, transfigured and invincible. It was thought before I came upon the scene that a play was held together by its weakest link in the form of a man or woman caught in the act of adultery. If a debased spirit runs through a play then all the characters are debased, however rhetorical their speech and violent their action."

G.B.S. exasperated me by the way he asked me the names of the simplest plants.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing to a luxurious bed of parsley. "I can't get any of it to grow in my garden since Charlotte died."

I didn't see the connection.

"When Charlotte was alive, it flourished everywhere," he innocently informed me. "A visitor who knows all about the symbolic significance of plants told me that parsley only flourishes where the woman wears the trousers."

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He was treading on a flower and he asked me the name of it.

"Harebell," I informed him.

"I don't like them. They ask to be trodden on," he said.

"The harebells are so lovely that I want to walk on air to avoid hurting them," I declared. They grew between the flagstones and made them seem as slight as themselves.

"I like the hard and the solid," G.B.S. argued. "I never could stand the weak and the fragile. Give me the solid ground to walk upon."

"You must have felt at home among the skyscrapers of New York," I suggested.

"They seemed to me the most ethereal things on earth, probably because they were built on sand. It needed but a Shavian breeze to blow them away."

I noticed he was stepping gingerly among the tender flowers. Unfortunately he had not yet learnt to walk on air although he was so lightfooted. He seemed to tiptoe along the path and when he fell, it was so lightly that I felt no shock.

Nor had he learnt to live on air. He was convinced that if we learnt to think in a certain way, strength would come without food, but there again, he had to admit that he had not reached the plane of pure thought.

"There is not a single thought of mine which will not prove utter nonsense in the course of time. Even our intimations are contaminated. I remember addressing a meeting on 'Religion'. My speech was on a very high plane but all I was thinking was that in an hour's time I'll be seeing Janet Achurch. When I did see her at last, she was the worst for drink and I had to talk religion to calm her, yes, give the speech all over again."

"There are one or two things you have said that ring a bell," I said.

"When I die, the bells will stop ringing."

It was my turn to say 'nonsense'.

"I'll turn the tables on the world by being the first to see through myself," he said. "I'll prove that my face was a pigment of the imagination. No such colour could have existed."

A policeman stopped us as we were walking back and politely

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asked us if we had seen two pigs about as they had escaped from a neighbouring garden.

"They must be on their way to interview me," G.B.S. replied. "They'll get nothing from me."

"It's what you'll get from them," the constable replied.

G.B.S. winked my way.

"Nature has so contrived that everything has a purpose. What is the purpose of the pig's tail, constable?"

"Like my helmet, for fun, I suppose."

"But even the helmet once had a purpose," G.B.S. replied.

"I mean it quite inoffensively, sir, but what is the purpose of a beard?" the man in the helmet asked.

"If you saw me without one you would have no doubt as to who stole the two pigs. The beard is like the pig's tail, the mark of gentility. Every child expects me to come down the chimney with a beard as white as snow, carrying a stocking full of presents. A beard isn't fun, I assure you."

When the policeman went G.B.S. said: "I know my way round the police. You see, when it rained in my street-corner days the only people who listened were the police and I learnt to talk to them. As they took notes of what I said, I used the most difficult words to spell and they soon gave up. I invariably addressed them as 'Ladies and Gentlemen' and congratulated them on their heroic struggle for woman's suffrage. I think they were converted to a phonetic alphabet to a man."

"What do you think happened to those pigs?" I asked.

"Eloped, I suppose. The pig is the most romantic of animals, a boar in fact. Nobody would ever accuse the pig of having manners: like myself he is frank which is the extremity of no manners. That explains the extremity."

"Would you like me to come in?" I asked before leaving.

"I am telling myself a long story and I don't want you to overhear it just yet. I am never lonely because I can always tell myself stories."

As I turned to go, he said: "What are you doing tonight? Anything important?"

"Writing."

"Some people do their best work at night when their minds

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are asleep, I can only work in the morning when my mind is awake. I'd go to pieces if I stopped writing."

"Nothing on earth will make me disturb your story," I said.

"I'm turning the tables on Freud and am portraying a glorious father who does not come on the stage but pervades the whole play. There are good fathers, aren't there? All the good men I have known have not had children and all the bad ones have had a quiverful. In this case, the numerous sons and daughters admit that he has never spoken a cross word to any of them, that he has been generous beyond measure. He permits his children to have a University education on condition that they do not take a degree and he gives them all the things they desire and encourages them to say what they think."

"You are setting a new fashion in parenthood."

"But there is one thing the children are not prepared for. When the father dies they will all have to work and none of them are fitted to do anything as unpleasant as that. They have all bits and scraps of tastes for painting, music and scholarship and are only fit to become critics."

"They fall in love?"

"Yes, they are all stricken with this hopeless disease."

"It gives you your chance of saying the last word on the subject."

"There never will be a last word. Like fingerprints all marriages are different. I die knowing less about it than when I wrote *Man and Superman*. The only superman I ever met was a woman and I'd marry her today."

He walked jauntily into his house, swinging a stick and he looked to me like Charlie Chaplin's forlorn tramp grown old. I stopped to talk to the roadsweeper on my way back.

"Do you know, sir, why this is such a peaceful village?" he said. "Because there are no agitators living in it. Each person keeps to himself and doesn't interfere with anyone else."

I asked him what he considered was the most unpleasant of his duties.

"Sweeping away the autumn leaves. It never seems to get done. It's funny making it my life work clearing away the mess

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trees, animals and men have left behind. I often stand over my broom thinking how one person takes to one thing and another takes to another. I was telling this to Mr. Shaw and he said: 'I'm doing the same job as you but not nearly so well. The lane looks cleaner after you've tackled it, but with me the more I try to clean up the world the worse it gets.' The old man will have his bit of fun."

And then he told me that he had seen a film called *Caesar and Cleopatra* and it was not at all bad.

"It must be marvellous to sit in a quiet village like this and think about emperors and queens and palaces. I always wondered what he did; he seems such a nice quiet gentleman."

When Charlotte declared in her Will that the efficiency of highly instructed and capable persons was often defeated for want of organized training for personal contacts and their authority made derisory by awkward manners she must have had certain people in mind.

I had, of course, every opportunity of watching how G.B.S. behaved with all manner of people and he certainly could be extremely cruel, a cruelty rarely invoked by the other person. He met people at our place whom we had known for thirty years, with whom we had more or less grown up, people like Flora Robson and Fenner Brockway, and he would say a few days later:

"I'm glad I was able to introduce you to Fenner the other day. I always admired his work in penal reform. I think you'll get on together. It was a good day when the conscientious objectors went to prison: they saw things first hand. My difficulty has been that I've had no first-hand experience. I have to talk through my hat. Experience is nine-tenths of the bore."

He noticed that I did not laugh and so he added: "I found the meeting most interesting. He seemed to know you."

G.B.S. got his laugh all right.

But it was his appropriation of ideas which amused me most. Ideas were always coming forth about all sorts of things. People came from every walk of life and when he wasn't talking, they blossomed forth and G.B.S. took note of everything. I watched



him taking the 'Coupled Vote' unto himself. It was mentioned in passing, G.B.S. laughed it out of court and the very next day unashamedly came in with the most original discovery of a glaring defect in our political system, and out came the Coupled Vote. He had, of course, written to one or two people and was incorporating the idea in his articles for the press. He carefully manœuvred the controversy so as to put himself in a minority of one and then the fight was on. We were treated as antagonists, called fools and vagabonds and as we did not respond in the same spirit, he denounced us as 'idealists' which was a shocking term of abuse!

It was as well that a publicist of his stature should interest himself in such things, especially at his age, and not a soul resented it, but it was generally accompanied by such an exhibition of bad manners that I could understand Charlotte becoming obsessed with the idea which inspired her Will. When she confided in T. E. Lawrence, he advised her to accept the genius as we accepted the Rocket and the Bleriot with all the works showing. Refinement only meant the ultimate hiding of the works.

"One has to accept one's temperament as one finds it," G.B.S. would say when he felt it necessary to apologize. "I only succumbed to it after a hard struggle and now I can only watch and pray that it won't let me down."

"It won't let others down," I hinted.

"I've let them all down one by one. They all leave me sooner or later."

Knowing that he had not met or written to certain friends for many years I recalled them to his memory.

"That was Charlotte's doing. She kept a careful check on the people I met. Once or twice I was forced to meet friends at the village inn because I knew she would not approve. I afterwards discovered that she knew all about it. Whenever certain books arrived of which she did not approve, she put them in a sack and buried them somewhere in the garden, probably in the marrow bed because we always had a bumper crop of this transfigured literature. Mainly books by Harris or about Paris."

He said this without reproach of any kind: it was just a mental note he had taken of the ways of wives.

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"She always dreamed," he added, "of an Ireland peopled by refined and sensitive humans and wanted them to have all that was best in literature, music and painting."

"She believed in the civilizing force of art," I said.

"I believed like Ruskin that a little animality never spoilt an artist but I could not say so," G.B.S. replied.

## Chapter Twelve

G. B.S. was the first to receive my *Days With Bernard Shaw*. He carefully put it on the wireless and for weeks he said nothing about it. Whenever I came I noticed it was still there and with slips of paper showing. We went on discussing, putting the universe right and proving everybody wrong. He was watching the press-cuttings, which lay scattered about him like autumn leaves.

I was sitting at home listening to a concert when he swooped on me and told me breathlessly that he had read my book and was going 'to crack it up to the skies'.

"That's very sweet of you," I said and tried to dismiss the subject.

"My difficulty is that they all think I wrote the book."

"I don't think anybody thinks that," I said.

"I tell you that they all think it. I've had a letter accusing me of doing so. As if I'd spend all that time writing about myself!"

"One letter shouldn't make you spring," I jested.

"So you think. I must stop it. I must put all the responsibility for the book on your shoulders, I must tell the world that I hadn't a hand in it. I may have one foot in the grave but I certainly have never had a hand in the fun. And it's good fun. I've thoroughly enjoyed it. I've read it from the last page to the first."

"If you enjoyed it, that's all I wanted."

"Chekhov always said that it was a pity that Tolstoy had no Boswell to note the unexpected and mutually contradictory sayings of the old sage and I have always regretted that the greatest conversationalist of all time remained unchronicled."

"Please don't think of me as a reporter."

"How could you have reported Oscar Wilde? You were only a child then."

He showed me a draft of a letter he was sending to an influential literary journal and I thought it the best letter he had ever written. Each thrust was mortal.

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"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"It's a grand letter but every word of it is untrue," I said, trying hard to laugh.

"That doesn't matter as long as it proves that you yourself have written the book. I assure you that your book will survive my facetious onslaught."

"But why make me out as inaccurate when every word in it is true?" I said indignantly.

"You're taking the whole thing far too heavily. The trouble with you is that you have no sense of humour, Inca."

"I don't make you take flowers to your wife's grave. I've never seen you carry a flower and you know perfectly well that I know that Charlotte was cremated and her ashes are at Golders Green. I say so further on in the book."

"Don't you see that gives an excellent reply? I'll frame the reply for you. In fact I've already framed it."

"The people who read your letter may not trouble to read the reply."

"Come, come, Inca. You're proving amazingly obstinate. You make out that I was lonely when Charlotte went. Another week of her illness would have driven me mad. The fact is I was relieved and glad. You may think me a monster but the human race is a monstrosity and all people who dared to look it in the face have gone mad: Swift, Ruskin, Tolstoy, Morris . . . I've told you often there is a lot of the Judas in me."

His face was so tragic that I didn't know how to reply.

"I wish I could get you to see the whole thing in proper perspective, Inca. You've been a good friend and the book is going to do me a lot of good. You must let me show my gratitude in my own way. My letter will do two things: it will prove that I had no hand in the writing of it and it will send people to your book."

"You make me sorry that I've ever met you, G.B.S."

"It was a bad day for you when we met, but a good day for me," G.B.S. said in his sweetest tones.

"You're an adept at denunciation but flattery does not become you," I said.

"When at last you get me to tell the truth, you think I am

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flattering you. I'm going to ask you something that's been in my mind a very long time: Why don't you write your biography instead of concentrating on a hot-house plant like myself? Why, why, why? Why hide your light under a Shaw? You hardly come into the book. You may not have felt at home in Shawland but I need not say how very much at home I have been in Winstenland. Columbus out for India discovered America, many people out for me have discovered you."

"You flatter like a gipsy, G.B.S."

"Perhaps I am a raggle-taggle gipsy, who knows? However, I never could read Borrow, Thoreau and Jefferies. I don't mind getting a hint from the communal organization of ants and bees, an organization which has aroused the envy of every totalitarian and every playwright, for the language of bees does not involve words and therefore there are no alphabet problems, but I have never swooned at the sight of a sunset or the discovery of a rare flower. Irishmen have always made better tramps than gipsies, preferring to sell a good yarn to clothes pegs."

I welcomed his effort to change the subject and my anger must have entered my thoughts about his obsession, for I found myself saying: "This concentration on a new alphabet proves that you are growing old, G.B.S."

"What a wonderful discovery, Inca! I've been growing old for the last forty years and you have only just discovered it. But how do you relate it with the alphabet?"

"Well, the learning of the alphabet must be a very trying experience for a child, a nerve-wracking one, to say the least. In old age the anxieties of childhood come up again. . . ."

I've never seen G.B.S. laugh so heartily. He positively shook and the room whirled round him.

"I thought I had given up all childish things but I see now that I was wrong. A psycho-analyst recently attributed all my interests to the pre-genital sadistic-anal-erotic stage of development. All my life in a nut-shell. As a matter of fact my behaviour pattern was determined very early in my life and has remained pretty consistent. I picked up a few views in the 'dust-bin' and have treasured them as my own."

"Why 'dust-bin'?" I asked.

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"That's the only term I can find for the philosophic mess: people professed a religion they did not believe in, paid lip service to an economic system which accepted poverty, ignored the finer sensibilities of men and animals, bolstered up bad literature and drama."

"The point is: how is it that you didn't accept things as they were? What made you a rebel in the first instance?"

"Little things, very little things. As I told you many times before, it was the current belief that if the window were kept open, one would catch one's death of cold; I kept the window open and survived."

"Yes, but what made you challenge the current belief?"

"Because I was so wretched that I wanted to die. If I were ill my mother would take notice of me. An open window was a short cut to sympathy. You can't imagine the plight of an unloved child."

"Then you were disappointed that the open window hadn't the desired effect?"

"It started a line of thought. The very young think more than we know, more tragic because they haven't the false consolations of age."

"False consolations?"

"I see through my own consolations. I laugh at the working of my mind and the whisperings of the soul. I accept the Life Force because I must, as I accept my hideous mug and my treacherous legs."

"What is there in you that sees through 'the things you live by' as Tolstoy called them?"

"There is something bigger than soul and mind," G.B.S. said and grew silent.

I had learnt to differentiate his silences as I had learnt to differentiate his moods, and the spirit in which he said things. His silences were extremely articulate.

"And that something bigger is God," I said.

"I haven't used the word because it has lost its significance through too much use. I have always been on speaking terms with Him. Haven't I grown more mysterious to you since you have known me so intimately?"

### *Shaw's Corner*

"I don't quite know in what sense you are using the word," I said. "If you mean that I find more and more in you that is inexplicable, then I must confess that you have grown less mysterious to me. At first you certainly didn't fit in with the picture formed by all that I had read and heard about you and you were more than a mystery to me."

"I've suffered more than anyone by misrepresentation. Whenever a new book comes out about me I say: 'What new lies is the author inventing?' Perhaps you are all letting me down very lightly because the truth about me would be devastating. One day I may settle down to a book of confessions but not yet. My next ten years are booked up and there is no time for such trivialities. Anyhow, who wants the stark reality and who would believe it if it were nothing but the truth? When a witness in court swears that he will tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, the Judge yawns, but if however, a witness declared that he will tell lies and nothing but lies then the jury would know that they were listening to a truthful person at last."

I knew G.B.S. was tired for he was falling back again into the stock illustrations. I begged of him before he went, in view of the inaccuracies in his letter, to reframe it.

"My dear Inca, I've already sent it."

Indeed it appeared the very next day.

But he was not satisfied with a mere letter. He wrote to friends that in my damned book I make him carry flowers to his wife's grave in the village, etc., etc. When he again came in he could not find sufficient superlative compliments.

"Your ears must have tingled, Inca. Thank you for a new 'Pilgrim's Progress'. It's done me a world of good."

"Then why did you persist?"

"Because I'm that kind of insect. Put it down to the pathogenic complexes in the psycho-neuroses."

He had more jejune verses to show me. I personally loved them for their modesty and simplicity. His joy was so great that to have been critical would have been cruelty itself. If an original thought or image crept in it was obviously due to an accident of rhyming

### *Shaw's Corner*

If I do not wish to slumber  
I eat a whole cucumber. . . .

His letter in the journal had the desired effect. G.B.S. proved conclusively that he was unerring in his tactics. I received many letters pointing out that G.B.S. was entirely wrong in the reading of my book and he laughed as he read them.

"There you are, Inca, I've done the trick. The road to fame is paved with fabrications. You know a dozen famous people and I've met two or three and how different they were from their literary representations. The truth about them would not nearly be so exciting. If I hadn't set a few thundering lies going about myself, not a soul would want to meet me."

He seemed to suggest now that because my book was attracting attention it was because the truth about him would have proved less palatable.

"Have you noticed that scrupulous exactitude and terminological-inexactitude meet at a certain point in the imagination, meet and coalesce?" he pointed out as if it had come to him for the first time. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on."

When he quoted Shakespeare he smiled as if he had reached native territory at last. He added: "A mere narration of facts, however exact, can be more misleading than fantasy: facts are only convincing when they are transfigured into fantasy. Webb discovered that; he had only to tell the truth to find that he was regarded as a follower of Swift and Bunyan."

I asked him why he was so keen on naturalism in art.

"If I were an artist I'd paint human beings just as I see them. They are as yet the most fantastic creations conceived. I have only to think of all the people I have known to want to laugh aloud. Now you understand why I have no mirrors in my house: I'd lose confidence in myself if I looked in the mirror. And I am less fantastic than most people! The ordinary person looks into the mirror and runs away from himself; if it is a she then she immediately creates a new human: the more unlike herself she becomes, the more she is sought."

"Then you have the numerous portraits of yourself about you to restore confidence?"



## Shaw's Corner

"They are so unlike me that I can take them seriously, the only things I can take seriously. They are good company."

News reached me from many quarters that as the result of my book, G.B.S. had broken with me completely. I saw my neighbour's inspiration even in this. Every day he came and we walked and talked more cordially than ever but the closer we were the more I heard of the severe breach in our relationship. Never was public report wider of the truth and never was it more believed. One or two people made an effort to heal the regrettable misunderstanding. One was sitting with me and implored me to take the initiative when who was to come in but G.B.S. himself, who was so wonderfully at home that the other visitor unceremoniously fled.

"What have I done?" G.B.S. asked. "They all run from me as from a leper. I must ask Bevan to make senility a notifiable disease. I'll be had up for loitering if I don't make haste and die. I've discovered an effective pill which I'll take at the appropriate moment. Do you know how I discovered it? Charlotte left it behind. I think some of these *natural* deaths are the most cruel things on earth."

I knew how Charlotte died, the pain and the horror of it. G.B.S. was only now beginning to talk about it.

He added almost in a whisper: "The only thing that would incline me to earth burial is the ability to take flowers to her grave. However, I am a flame-worshipper. I'd confine all my work to the flames if I had my way. When my factotum asks me what he is to do with this or that I have one reply and one only: 'Burn it.'"

I wanted to explain the mission of the departed visitor but how could I when he was in such a sentimental mood? But he himself led up to it, deviously but deliberately.

"So, Inca, you have become the classic example of the good neighbour. You'll go down to history as the only man who could bear my presence."

"But I understand that we have quarrelled and that we have separated for ever, that I cut you in the lane and you cut me."

"They are saying that, are they? Good, that's all to the good. Now they won't pester you when they want to see me. It won't

make any difference, I assure you, even if we meet every day; they'll still think that all is broken. Once a rumour is set going, it gets so solid and secure that a mere fact is like a soap bubble that bursts in contact with it. If you don't mind, I certainly don't."

"It's all very unpleasant," I said.

"Then you don't know what real unpleasantness is. I have been so ignorant of illness that when I had a bout of diarrhoea I used to think the end had come. You must treat lies as a form of elimination. Without lying the earth would soon be mentally clogged up with fact, like that wretched dump down the lane, or like Morley's *Life of Gladstone*."

"Is that why you set this rumour going?" I asked.

"I never set anything going," he answered calmly. "You see, I've stopped taking any notice of what is said about me and so because I do not deny what is said, they conclude that it must be true. If I spent my time denying what I hear, I'd never have time to do my own lying. Tolstoy used to say that all art is lies and Oscar Wilde claimed that the telling of untrue things was the proper aim of art. That is why in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* Oscar Wilde anticipated all that I had to say."

"All the same," I said prosaically, "I wish you would deny one or two things."

"You want it both ways. When I deny the accuracy of some of the things in your book, you immediately take offence and think that it will be the end of your book; and when I say nothing to refute a rumour, you again take offence. Two affirmatives don't make a negative, you know, they generally make a quarrel. If I tell a falsehood and you contradict me, it doesn't mean that you are right; we may both be wrong. In my plays there are a thousand examples of this, in fact that is the secret of my dramatic construction. As Granville-Barker once said patronizingly: 'Your plays are wattle and daub, not throttle and grab.' He meant that my plays are held together by mud, good clean mud."

He brought out a little composition he had attempted called *Days With Winsten*.

"Shall I read it to you?"

I had no choice in the matter. To hear G.B.S. read anything

## Shaw's Corner

was magical. He sought for his glasses, carefully adjusted them, looked my way and then read from a shorthand script:

"I was walking at great speed down the lane to post seventeen letters and eighty-three postcards which I managed to write after my nap in the afternoon, when I met Inca coming out of the demolished abbey, looking as if he had met *La belle dame sans merci*.

"Why alone and palely loitering?" I asked. He was alone but certainly far from pale.

"I've been sitting behind the ruins reading. It's very peaceful there."

"I find it a change from the bustle and noise of Shaw's Corner. The only spot I find quieter than the ruins is my flat at Whitehall Court," I said. "There is no quiet in this confounded hole. Two people passed me as I . . ."

"It's worse than Piccadilly," Inca interrupted.

"The women in Piccadilly are at least interesting but here one can't walk a yard without falling over a dog. What have you been reading?"

"Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*," Inca answered.

"I thought so, I thought so," I exclaimed. "Trust an Irishman to make you thoroughly miserable. Have you known an Irishman to do anything else but whine?"

"And what have you been reading?" Inca asked, ignoring my esoteric cogitation.

"A man who writes never reads. He has no time to get to know things," I declared. "If he did he wouldn't be so anxious to display his ignorance."

"I don't find all writers ignorant," Inca said, trying hard to recall a writer who wasn't. "Sartre is a philosopher, for example. I suppose by ignorance you mean that there are lots of things one knows very little about in spite of newspapers."

"You mention newspapers," I said, "what do you think of the world situation? Don't you think the world is suffering from acute economic indigestion?"

"You're surely not pleading for a purge?" he anxiously inquired.

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'Don't call it "purge" or you'll have the doctors on the scene. Pills and potions won't do the economic system any good. What it needs is a thorough overhaul.'

'Do you mean a change of government?' he asked as a drowning man clutching to a straw.

'A change of government is only a change of language. Talk won't heal it,' I said omnisciently.

'Then what will?' he pleaded.

'I'll tell you what. . . .' I hesitated because there wasn't an idea in my head. I might have been an economist with my lack of insight. 'I'll tell you what: read my *Intelligent Woman's Guide*.'

'But I'm only an ignorant man.'

'Then read my *Political What's What*. There are one or two good stories in it.'

'Thousands have read it and the world is still in a mess,' Inca said as I dropped letters and postcards into the letter box.

'I know, but they also read other books. Now if they stopped reading everything else and concentrated on me, things would soon change. Life would get a new meaning, people would be re-animated with the life force.'

'And how are you to get everybody to read your books only?'

'That question is the only one you've asked worth answering. I'll tell you how: in exactly the same way as we've got everybody to read the Bible. Even I read the Bible.'

'The Bible has made no difference. The world is still in a mess,' Inca insisted.

'Without the Bible there would never have been a Bernard Shaw. I'm in a line with the prophets, the first prophet with a sense of humour.'

We now reached Shaw's Corner. I opened the gate and walked in. I have my ideas for settling the world problems but why should Inca have them *gratis* when I could make a fortune by giving them to the *Ohio Chronicle*? I switched on the wireless and soon forgot all the cares of the world by listening to the Children's Hour. Awakening with a start I went up to dress but I was called to the telephone. It was a call from Cotopaxi

## Shaw's Corner

offering me two thousand pounds for twenty words on *Keats as a Prose Writer*. I offered to do ten words on *Shaw as a Poet* for five hundred, and heard a strange laugh at the other end. It's a queer sensation hearing somebody laughing thousands of miles away."

He put his script down, looked up at me and said: "However much I try and write about others it always degenerates into a rigmarole about myself and it's always the same old thing. The world has got into a rut about me. You've dragged me out of the rut and don't think you'll be thanked for it. It takes fifty years at least to dislodge a preconception. Don't I know it. In fifty years time they'll take a phonetic alphabet for granted as they take contraceptives for granted, and they'll forget who started the whole thing. One or two centenarians might recall there was a chap, Bernard Shaw or something but they will not remember how the name got into their heads."

"It's amazing to me how people who have met you once or twice or not at all are prepared to tell me in no uncertain terms all about you. There's nothing they do not know."

"My defensive measures against the mob. Please don't leave me naked to my enemies. Let them cling to their illusions while the real Shaw sits and chats with you."

One of the interesting effects of my book was to give him a new facade.

"Before I go, I'll be thought a true native here," he declared.

Like a parliamentary candidate at an election, he affected a wonderful interest in the babes and made pathetic efforts to win a smile from the frightened young. All because I mentioned that children were unknown territory to him. Also he photographed every house in the place and generally got into conversation. He was not above saying one thing to one person and the very opposite to another and then boasting to us of his tactics.

"I'm getting on like a house on fire in the village. When they see my camera, they all come running out," he told us as he showed us the photographs.

This new-found interest kept him wonderfully busy and there was no end of familiar gossip he brought us, excitedly telling us

### *Shaw's Corner*

everything he had heard in a pronounced Irish accent. He asked us how he could obtain the latest rhyming dictionary because he meant to beat Wordsworth at his own game. First he thought of writing a kind of *Ballad of Reading Gaol* but it would be called a *Ballad of Rural Life*.

"There's no gaol worse than being confined to a dull village and having to see the same faces every day, Inca."

Then he thought of bringing in money to ease his pressing financial burdens by throwing off a few jingles about each place in the village. "They'd go as Christmas Cards. I can't even afford a decent coffin for myself; it will have to be plain deal."

It had become an obsession with him that he was too poor to continue at his present level of existence.

"The Whitehall flat which I never use is costing me eight hundred a year and could easily be changed for six hundred. It's only a glorified office. And I've been trying to work out how I can economize on food. Things which were less than a farthing when I was a child are a shilling now. Then I hadn't a farthing but now that I have they are unobtainable. Charlotte could never understand why she couldn't get chocolate when she had the money to pay for them. What's going to become of us all?"

## *Chapter Thirteen*

G. B.S. used the term senility more and more both in his conversation and his correspondence. I asked him what he exactly meant by the word.

"I'm no good at definitions but it means something very real and definite to me. First of all you lose interest in the world. As long as you have your creature comforts and you can manage to rub along, all is well. And then you resent the presence in the world of other people: you regard them with suspicion. At first you loathe yourself for being like that but imperceptibly you begin to accept it and then senility sets in. With the majority it sets in at about twenty-five or thirty but with me it came sixty years later."

It was foolish of me to try and console him with the suggestion that, at his present age, he was as alert mentally as most people in their prime. He threw his hands in the air and would not permit me to talk.

"I am double your age and I know. What do you know about old age? You might as well tell a person in his coffin that he is not dead because he is smiling. I am senile and everybody tells me so except you. I don't want all your cant about serenity and wisdom. What is there to be serene about, and where is the wisdom to explain decay? A person who has developed his sensibilities to their highest point finds no consolation in finding them thoroughly corrupt. I am a rotting sensual beast like the animals I used to see in the ditches when I was a boy. By the way, you don't see that kind of thing now?"

There came a vivid description of the horrible things he saw as a boy. "I loved horror and indulged in it as much as any boy, but with me it was a thousandfold because of my imagination. My imagination went wild because I had nothing whatever to cling to. My world was fantastic. Talk about giving children freedom. I had freedom and have never trusted myself since."

"I thought that it was the only thing you did trust, G.B.S.?"

## *Shaw's Corner*

"Nonsense, I've never had faith in myself. The person who came over from Ireland was a creature only fit to mock and sneer. And what a cunning knowing person I was. It was not long before I wiped the floor with professor and statesman. They certainly suffered humbugs gladly."

In a twinkling of an eye, his mood changed from disgust to elation. "Genius is the capacity for giving pain, mental pain of course. I could not bear physical agony. I must have realized quite early that people indulged in intellectual self-torture and thoroughly enjoyed it. I piled it on until it became unbearable. That's why I was so popular. There's nobody like it today. I suppose nothing intellectual hurts any more. A sort of intellectual anaesthesia has set in."

I suggested that there was more self-questioning than ever.

"I see no signs of it," G.B.S. answered. "You've brushed D. H. Lawrence out of the way and Aldous Huxley talks fatalism. As to Sartre with his negation. . . . If I were only fifty years younger, I'd wake the world up a bit. Better the sentimental humanitarian than the hard-headed war-monger; a plague on both their grouses."

He was always warning me against the sentimentalists.

But he was not fifty years younger, or rather he hadn't the body to hold a person fifty years younger. He did not think for a moment that the problems of the world were beyond man's grasp, but things were so ordained that the moment man reached forward, his hand grew too feeble to hold anything.

"The thing to remember is that knowledge is not passed on through books, but through inheritance. I was obviously born with my knowledge. How, I don't know. There is as much difference between the bookworm and the aristocrat as between the bookmaker and the artist. It is the quality of the human material that matters. The problem is not feeding the masses but weeding them. I want a pool of aristocrats from which we can draw our administrators and statesmen but for our own self-respect we must keep the workers well-fed, well-housed and well-educated."

Our friendship was of an extraordinary character; I must have acted as a catalyst, for he invariably became bright and



## *Shaw's Corner*

talkative in my presence and antagonistic away from me. He found it easy to say mean things about me to others and yet hung on to me for life.

When I pointed out this fact to him he said: "Mutual distrust has always been the basis of association. Look how well they get on in the House of Commons: mud is thicker than water. There are lots of things I like in you, the way you listen to my jokes as if you've never heard them before; the way you quietly lead me up the lane knowing that I can't see in the dark. If you can put up with me, you can put up with anything, even with life itself. I know that life has dealt you many a harsh blow, but the harshest of all was to inflict me on you. A sage can be a plague, don't I know it."

I was moved by this pretty little speech and thanked him for it.

"You're much happier at denunciation," I said.

"That's perfectly true. When I wanted to win the affections of any lady, I always denounced her in no uncertain terms and she fell for me. Cardinal Vaughan once told me that he once went up to a street-lady and called her terrible names. 'Now you're talking business,' she blandly replied. 'If you go on like that you'll lose one of your regular worshippers. I like you when you run down the others but when you become personal, then it's time to call a halt. No man has a right to talk to a woman like that unless he's married to her.' Vaughan was the fellow who drew huge crowds by denouncing the 'sins of society'."

This story brought up such a spate of stories of the same vintage that I was quite embarrassed by his inventions.

"I was walking along Piccadilly one day with Charlotte when I was stopped by one of them with a 'Hallo, dearie, don't you remember me?' I expressed complete ignorance of her. 'Go away,' I said. 'You once emptied your pockets and gave me your last shilling and asked for nothing in return. And since then I've always cut out your photograph whenever I've come across it. You should see my room. I think of you as my patron saint.' And she disappeared in the crowds.

"Charlotte said nothing for quite five minutes and then said:

"'Isn't it shocking to have your photograph in such a person's room?'"

### *Shaw's Corner*

"'That's the only way of getting in touch with the very best people,' I answered. But she didn't laugh.

"It was never mentioned again. There is no way of bridging a misunderstanding between husband and wife: there are a thousand subjects which must never be mentioned. That's why it is so difficult to find anything to talk about. I always had the wireless on."

When G.B.S. retailed these stories he always laughed as much as his cronies. He especially enjoyed telling them to his female friends for he knew that they would be passed on with baroque embellishments. There was one lady who drank in this kind of thing and the effect was worse than the strongest liquor.

"That's how I get my stuff across to the highest quarters," G.B.S. explained. "I tell, She tells, We tell. There is the story of my wallet which seems to amuse everybody: I was walking down Mayfair one day, I really don't know what I was doing in that part of the world, when a very respectable-looking man stopped me and informed me that there was a terrible mess on the back of my jacket. There was a convenience near, so we went down and the good gentleman very quietly and politely brushed my jacket for me. I thanked him and hurried away. When I got back, I found my inside pocket had been emptied of all its contents. The things people do to keep up their respectability."

And then there was the story of Lytton Strachey who was coming to lunch with him and when he arrived he hadn't the taxi fare. Nor had G.B.S. any money in the house. They explained things to the driver but he wouldn't budge. The two famous bearded men put their heads together and they thought of neighbour Barrie, but he was out. "'What about an I.O.U.?" Lytton Strachey asked. "You can offer me the whole blooming alphabet with the Chinese knocked in but I won't take it," the driver answered. "Look here, man, it's only five bob," Lytton Strachey answered. "Four and threepence, to be exact sir," the driver said. "Look here, there is Maynard Keynes down Whitehall. Drive me there."

"No, sir, I won't budge. If you can't pay five shillings, how are you going to pay seven and six?"

"Luckily a millionaire friend in the shape of H. G. Wells came

## Shaw's Corner

along just then and had the money on him. I wonder if Lytton ever returned it. I rather respected the taxi fellow: Lytton Strachey mentioned who I was but he had never heard of the name."

G.B.S. told me that he had had a strange request from a dance hall. Could they put up a photograph which they had of Bernard Shaw taking dancing lessons? "I discovered at a Fabian Summer School that I was socially futile after eight if I could not dance and so at sixty-something I took a course of dancing lessons and became the most sought-for young man in the place."

He got up and tried a few waltz steps. "It would all come back to me in no time. I can spout Dickens and Bunyan and no one would suspect that I was fourteen when I memorized them. My head is full of lovely passages, poetry, music, plays. . . . They keep me young. They are more powerful than any complex."

He hummed a passage of Brahms and then declaimed Shelley.

"That's the Shaw behind the mask," he said, looking very sad.

I reminded G.B.S. that more people are listening to good music than at any time.

"In my day a good piece came round once a year if we were lucky but now you can hear it morning, noon and night. I switched on this morning and there was Mozart," G.B.S. said.

"And poetic-drama has come into its own," I added.

"That's easy. I always found it much easier to write a poetic drama than a prose comedy. When I am gone somebody will translate my plays into verse. I always thought they would make excellent librettos for operas, if there was a Mozart about."

G.B.S. sang the death scene in *The Doctor's Dilemma* and then declaimed it as Sir Henry Irving might have done and then he spoke it as he wanted it spoken and asked me which I preferred.

"But will there be a G.B.S. to speak the lines?" I asked.

"The best way to kill Shaw is to start a Shaw Memorial Theatre. They are all suggesting that my money should go to that kind of thing. I want their money to keep me alive. Pass the hat round, Inca, as we used to say at the open-air meetings."

I thought this a good moment for showing G.B.S. an S.O.S. from a mutual friend. I had his consent to show it to G.B.S. and I knew that his plight must be desperate if he permitted it.

### *Shaw's Corner*

"Tell him to go to hell," was the immediate response.

"He's there already and it is for us to restore him to purgatory."

"Why come to me of all people, a man who pays twenty-four shillings in the pound income-tax? I have refused within the last few days to prevent destitution in India, to help desperate refugees in Timbuctoo, and fifteen repertory theatres from going under. If I am ill I'll have to take advantage of the National Health Scheme because I'd rather be killed than kept alive."

"I enjoy your humour as much as anyone but this is a serious matter," I pleaded.

"If I laugh at a thing it means that I think it worthy of serious consideration. How much? You see, Inca, I do my good deeds in private because once I get a reputation for generosity, I'll have to employ a dozen secretaries to answer the begging letters; and a couple of psychologists."

However, nothing came of it except a long letter explaining his fearful plight and a suggestion that any working-class family has more money coming in than a mere author.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

G. B.S. could not understand why it was that every institute he approached turned down his phonetic alphabet. All he wanted was research and yet the very organizations created for such research were unable to take him seriously.

"They think it a huge joke," he said to me. "It's the most serious proposal of my life and I'm willing to give all I have to the founding of an Institute of Phonetics and Alphabet Research."

He showed me letter after letter and he was mystified by the universal disapproval.

"I can only persuade people to do what they wanted to do. When it comes to things that matter, they laugh and pass me by," he complained.

I knew exactly how his proposals were received and I had no consolation to offer him.

"When I am out of the way, they may take a kindlier view of my suggestions," he said. "Even the cranks are giving them a wide berth."

"As you have proved that you haven't a penny, they may question your ability to provide the funds," I suggested.

"I don't mind being in a minority of one when I'm in the opposition, but when it comes to a constructive idea then support is necessary," he argued. "I'm only asking for research. If they find that no time would be saved by a phonetic alphabet, then I'll not complain. I don't ask for enthusiasm, self-sacrifice or martyrdom; all I want is for trained people to come with critical but open minds and give ten, fifteen years to the subject. It's not much that I'm asking."

He told me that his very friends were mocking him.

"Of course, all of them would prefer me to leave my money to them, the wealthier they are, the more they need."

"My dear G.B.S., you mustn't expect your friends to follow you all the way," I pleaded.

## *Shaw's Corner*

"I know! I've always avoided friends like poison. They love me for my blue eyes and silk-white beard."

It was his way to make each one feel that he was the chosen one and all others were weeds and drugs. I pointed this out to him but it did not deter him.

"Each nation likes to feel that it is God's chosen race and all others are infidels, so why not with individuals?" he pointed out. "I never mix my friends. There's one lady who wants me to leave my money to her."

"Have you no sense of humour, G.B.S.?"

"Don't I know it! I think I have failed to inspire the university folk because I simply can't put any humour into the thing. I've got hold of a thing which defies my technique. Probably I don't believe in it enough or I'd be able to laugh at it. I've laughed at doctor, teacher, statesman and clergyman but when it comes to the A.B.C. I'm as solemn as a paid mourner."

"Perhaps it is because it is the child of your old age?"

"It's only in old age when people should have children. The greatest thing Gandhi did in India was to stop child marriage. Charlotte would not agree to have a child because she thought herself too old for such things. Young girls are stupefied by their children. I look forward to the time when people will not marry until they are forty. I assure you they can still be naughty at that age."

G.B.S. was on his pet subject. "There should be research on the biological consequences of such marriages," he added. "Do they produce better children?"

"I have no doubt that they do," I dogmatically asserted.

"Nonsense, Inca. I don't think so for a moment. I've seen the children of intellectuals and I don't like them. Some of them used to come to the Fabian Summer Schools."

"What was wrong with them?" I asked.

"Spoilt, hopelessly spoilt. Mind you, I think that women must be spoilt if they are to do good art. I knew a good actress who did her share of domestic chores and she was never the same again."

"There you prove yourself a true Victorian, G.B.S. Nowadays all of us, man or woman and however spoilt, have to help in the house. You are one of the lucky ones."

### Shaw's Corner

"On the contrary, I always helped in the housework when I stayed with the Salts. It was a cardinal principle of the Simple-Lifers to wear little, eat little and to help a little. I did my best work then. I wrote *Candida*. I should have thought of my phonetic alphabet then; it would have materialized by now, like the wearing of sandals, which in my day was the mark of a crank. Now you see why I'm not afraid of the outcome of my ideas. They'll soon be wondering why I was considered exceptional. When a man is considered commonplace and pedestrian then he knows that he has succeeded in converting the world to his way of thinking. One of the miracles of life is to think the most fantastic idea and to watch the way in which it gradually emerges as a platitude. I have seen it happen to one idea of mine after another."

"And which of them has given you the greatest satisfaction?" I asked.

"I'm never satisfied. When I was young I lived in a dream-world of my own making and I only felt at home in the world of art and poetry; in other words I was mad. By a deliberate effort I became ultra-sane and now only occasionally do I get intimations of that dream-world from which I have been exiled. I have not met in real-life a single inhabitant of that dream-world. I have always been an alien here. Perhaps I am unkind in saying that I have not met a single inhabitant: both of you are of that world. At moments I deeply resent your presence but deep down I am glad of it."

He stood up and stared long at a recent painting my wife had done.

"What do you think is the object of art?" I asked.

"Ecstasy, Inca, ecstasy," was his immediate answer. And he went on staring. I knew he was back in the dream-world he longed for.

"I hate returning to Shawland," he said.

## Chapter Fifteen

HE came in with a play by an anonymous but learned Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and asked if he might read it to us. It was entitled: *An Adventure and a Discussion*.

We laughed all through the reading but we had the advantage of his interpretation. Would he ever find a World-betterer as young and enthusiastic as G.B.S.? Would he ever find a young lady as fierce and coquettish? Would he ever find an intellectual with such a romantic passion for mathematics? Would he ever find a father who could talk so patiently with a heretic son? G.B.S. was all of these and took them in his stride.

"If he is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature," I said, "we must take the budding dramatist very seriously."

"Writing a play is no laughing matter, especially in these days," G.B.S. agreed. "Do you agree with the Chinese priest who declares that the Pinks are freaks, dangerous freaks, because they are unteachable?"

"There are one or two Pinks who have proved teachable," I answered.

"Name one," G.B.S. insisted. "We Westerners are the best teachers in the world but we refuse to learn the simplest and most obvious truths. The fact is that we suspect truth. Our science is only a way of running away from it. That is why we know nothing."

Obviously this Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature was a person after his own heart.

"I'm a freak and you're a freak," he continued. "I once thought of myself as the only normal person but now that I realize that I am as others, it isn't so lonely for me."

G.B.S. looked deadly serious. He continued:

"Have you ever watched Gandhi listening? It's an education in itself. He listens not to refute but to understand. Have you ever met a Pink who knows how to listen so helpfully? I can't think of any?"



## Shaw's Corner

We went through the list of names: Morris was fidgety; Webb was omniscient, Lawrence self-centred, Hyndman assertive, Meredith deaf. No, we could not think of one.

"We don't even know how to listen to ourselves," G.B.S. said.

Next time he came in, he confessed to having written the play.

"It does not give value for money. A play should have at least ten good laughs, I've only managed six, and four of those are not too good. They only touch the surface of the mind. There is no melting point in the play. As it is, men will go home and quarrel with their wives as they do after the conventional comedies."

"There is not the poetry of *Heartbreak House* in this new play, nor the great sweep of thought of *Man and Superman*, nor the clashes of vision of *Major Barbara*, but there is something here which the others haven't got, there is an old man's serenity. . . ."

"I can't afford another failure. Once the rot sets in, it can never be retrieved. It's the wood worm in the furniture: it turns the best to dust. I was once walking with Beatrice Webb in her father's park and we were admiring the wonderful trees. Next day we went there again and not a tree was there. They had crumbled to dust."

There were alterations and more alterations. He introduced long speeches and more topical references but he was not satisfied. He was more critical than ever of his work.

"I have not degenerated into self-appreciation," he said, glad of the fact that he was able to judge his work objectively.

"What would happen if all people started talking as frankly as in your play, if life became a mental strip-tease?" I asked.

"There is no danger of that. There are no people left who can afford it as there are no people left who can afford romantic love. Men talk for money as they marry for money. When literary gents see me they only get really passionate when they start talking about the money they made out the last book. I never married for money and I refused to marry until I had enough money to support a wife; and I never wrote for money and have never expected a penny for my lectures. I formed my habits when I had no money and as my money came very late in my life, I've had no time to change my habits."

"Your success came as a shock to you," I added appreciatively.

"I didn't realize I was successful, until I was well on the way to failure. I remember, when I was being taught how to swim, the professor telling me that I must think I can swim only when I feel perfectly at home when drowning."

"I thought you learnt naturally, G.B.S.?"

"My dear Inca, when I wanted to learn how to swim I didn't go to a duck for it but to a professor who did not know how to swim, as when I wanted to write plays I went to myself. When I was a dramatic critic they accused me of never having written a play; when I wrote plays, they asked why I had never heeded my own criticism. Henry James once told me that he had read every word of my dramatic criticism and I told him that I had read all his books on psychology. He afterwards told Wells 'Would any other man have mistaken me for my learned brother?' he complained. Wells answered: 'Shaw once mistook *himself* for me.'"

He told me of his mother who could sit through a play of his without betraying so much as a flicker of a smile.

"I walked with her through Piccadilly and told her that I was in a position to buy her anything she desired. 'Why should I desire anything? And if I did, money could never buy it.'"

Again and again when I came I found him pacing the garden and beating the trees violently.

"Beating about the bush?" I asked.

"I don't know how to get rid of certain images," he explained. "They emerge from nowhere and haunt me till I can stand it no longer. It's a great relief to be able to work off my anger on something. The more I explain them away, the more they mock me. The weakening resistance of old age, I suppose. Sexual senility."

Then he laughed as if enjoying a joke against himself.

"Beatrice always thought me sexually senile because I mixed with types she didn't understand, the theatrical type. It was all right for her to mix with Arthur Balfour and Joseph Chamberlain but it was wrong for me to fall for Pat Campbell and Janet Achurch. She exorcised these 'evil' spirits by bringing Charlotte on the scene."

"That explains your antipathy to sex after marriage," I said.

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"I've thought of that explanation years before Freud. But, you know, Inca, life is not all of one piece; a good artist may make it appear so but it is made up of bits and pieces and each detachable. It was possible for me to live entirely separate lives, separating my interests as a Fabian from my interests as an artist. I won't say they never met but they could be kept strictly apart. Please do not think that I found the Fabian atmosphere cold and disciplined while I found the artistic atmosphere hot and undisciplined. The contrary was the case."

Again he beat the tree hard and left a mark on it.

"When we went for that drive recently, we passed the house in which Ellen Terry lived, where she passed years and years of her gifted life in domestic drudgery," he added.

"Probably the happiest years of her life," I said. "At least she said so."

"Forgetfulness is always the happiest time of one's life. I can't forget."

We walked along the grove at the lower end of the garden and he confessed to being haunted by a feeling of insecurity.

"I am being mocked day and night," he said. "My soul is being cut by the ragged edges of my life. My memories are a saw, a blunt rusty saw."

He pulled himself together.

"This will get me nowhere," he said and went to his shelter.

"I put on that little act for your benefit."

He stared at his blue page of shorthand symbols, crushed it and threw it in the waste-paper basket.

"Don't go," he said. "I want to talk to you."

I sat down on the step of the shelter.

"I mean to convert you to communism before I go. There is a core of resistance in you which I can't weaken. You call it principle, I call it obstinacy."

"Why should you care whether I am a communist or not?" I asked.

"Because it is a reflection on my power of persuasion. About the things that don't matter, you are very reasonable, in fact, too reasonable; but about fundamental things you are more obstinate than a mule."

## Shaw's Corner

It is strange that the person who tried so hard to convert me to communism, pacifism and a host of other isms, should consider 'conchy' and 'communist' the most derogatory of terms and never hesitated to use them to damn a person. He knew the effect of mentioning to a gossip-carrier that so-and-so was a 'conchy'.

"You seem to shrink, like most good people, from taking your thought to its logical conclusion," he added.

"There is a strong Jesuit streak in you, G.B.S. You must have enjoyed writing *St. Joan*."

"The play wrote itself. I do not suggest that you are a coward, Inca, but I hoped that you would be brave enough sometimes to agree with me. Why do people enjoy taking the opposite view to myself when they know I am always right? One can agree with every word you have said: one can accept the sanctity of human life, one can accept the democratic form of government, one can accept freedom of speech and freedom of thought and yet hold the opinions I hold. Both are different aspects of the same thing. A coin can only come down on one side, but there can be no coin without both sides."

I put before him an alternative analogy.

"Stop the confounded analogy," G.B.S. retorted. "I'm not interested in subtleties. I want to save you from your so-called principles. As Ellen Terry once said: 'There is one weak spot in you which is all my own and it is for me to find it.'"

"And did she find it?" I asked.

"She found that I hadn't a strong spot anywhere."

But it was his Will he wanted to discuss with me. It was worrying him. He asked me if I thought it fair.

"It's your money and you can do what you like with it. There is no one who can prevent you throwing it down the drain, if you so desire," I answered.

"So that is what you think," he said angrily. "So that is what you think! I'm disappointed with you, Inca. I'll tell how I came to it: there are hundreds of organizations out to propagate the things I stand for but they have hundreds of members, mainly due to my ceaseless propaganda, and they should be able to stand on their own feet; but there is an imperative need for a phonetic alphabet and I am in a minority of one to realize it and therefore

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all that I have must go into it. I like being in minority of one and you will see that within fifty years, as with all my other ideas, it will be taken as a matter of course. It takes about fifty years for the simplest idea to come through."

I was not so sure that all the things he stood for had come through.

"What ideas of yours have come through in the sense that they are generally accepted?" I asked innocently.

"Well, you surprise me. Isn't it obvious? Poverty which was once taken for granted is now considered an evil thing. Even the clergymen are asking for increased stipends so that they may preach 'Blessed are the poor', with a care-free minds."

"But you were not in a minority of one in preaching the abolition of poverty," I said.

"But my way of doing it was singular, you will admit. I brought assurance, laughter and reality into a movement which might easily have degenerated into sentimentality. I made my supporters laugh at the things they believed in and my enemies ashamed of the things they believed in. It wanted some doing because fanatics have no sense of humour and most people are fanatics, especially the reactionaries."

"You must not think of yourself as the only man with a sense of humour, G.B.S."

"I'm referring to my particular kind of humour, the Shavian humour. I tickled the mind and not the ribs. The people who have their ribs tickled end by quarrelling, but the people, who come under my spell, begin to think for themselves and that is the beginning of everything good. One has but to think about a thing to find it evil."

"Everything?"

"Name the exception. I can't think of any exception. When you think about me, do you find me good? Shelley said: 'To think is to be full of woe,' or something to that effect, but I say: 'To think is to laugh.' I'm the superior animal."

"Have you no continuous moods of depression?" I asked.

"Only when I'm not working. Why are the workers the happiest section of the community? Even when poor they rarely grumble except when they are out of work. It's their philosophic

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content I have had to fight all my life. Galsworthy always pictured the poor as forlorn and helpless. He pitied where I hated."

"Your laughter springs from hate?"

"Nonsense, who has ever explained the source of laughter? If you want to destroy it, start seeking for explanations. The laughter is in the nature of the beast. And what a beast!"

"All the poor people in your plays, as in the plays of Shakespeare, are caricatures. You always avoided the poor except *en masse*. . . ."

"I came to bury them not to praise them. And I laughed aloud at their burial. It is true enough that I've never been able to talk to individual workers except when only one turned up at my meetings and that was not so infrequent as you think. Even then I talked as if he were a thousand. It wasn't a heart-to-heart talk, I assure you. It was a fight and I didn't pull my punches."

"We have wandered far from the Will," I reminded G.B.S.

"Oh, yes, the cursed Will. It is strange to think of myself dead, reduced to nothing. 'Gladly I lived and gladly I die and I lay me down with a will.' What is so shocking to contemplate is that I won't be there to administer it."

"And you think communism and amassing a huge fortune compatible?"

"Why, Inca, do you make me responsible for all the contradictions in life? If I were not a chaos of contradictions, I could not have written plays. As I have told you many a time, I escaped into the writing of plays because I could not resolve the inherent contradictions of existence. It's the fool who can answer all the questions; a wise man asks and does not expect an answer. Occasionally, very occasionally, I think I have the answer to a very simple question, but the moment goes and I am left in worse confusion. I seem to be only just passing out of my dumbness. And I am supposed to be the most articulate being on earth!"

## *Chapter Sixteen*

NEVER was there a more eventful journey than that of Saint Joan from Ayot Saint Lawrence to London. Well encased and closely guarded, she felt in her clay state every crack of the neglected lane, every vibration. Right from the moment she left the studio, the head began to tremble and the sculptor stood by her and with both hands kept her whole. Joan took her journey to the faggots more bravely than the clay Joan her journey to London. The lorry never exceeded a funereal pace and many a driver complained that she was holding up the business of the world. The roads were unfit for saints to travel on.

There was much work to do in the London studio before she was ready for the foundry.

"She will not find me here when she returns," G.B.S. feared and counted the days.

He watched his dying and planned for his immortality.

"I suppose I'll have to put up with Tennyson as a neighbour and miss the blackbird. Westminster is a dreary place."

As we walked up the lane he stopped to tell me that the village should be renamed to 'Shavia Saint Bernard'. It looked the most isolated place on earth at the moment and I thought it a very modest ambition. At this house bricks were piled high and I thought that he contemplated extending the house or building a tower.

"It would be good fun if we all started competing in towers as they did in Italy," I said.

"What tower?"

"What are all these bricks for?" I asked.

"I should have told you that the gate has come back from the blacksmith. He's made a splendid job of it. It will be clear to everyone that this is Shaw's Corner. No filmstar will again catch her death of cold in looking for my house, nor will she need my lap for thawing. The letters are now large enough for

all to see. There they are, like an army of banners. I'll probably be at Westminster before they are put up."

The old wooden posts that once held the anonymous gate lay on the ground like the discarded bodies of deviationists; instead there were to be pillars of fire in the shape of red bricks: a triumphal entrance. And symbol of property, there would also be for the first time a smaller gate marked: PRIVATE.

"I don't want every Tom, Dick and Harry to go trooping into my house; at least not without paying a fee."

"I hate the word 'Private'," I said.

"You *would* use a cat-o'-nine-tails to hit a fly, Inca. I have discovered long ago that you have no sense of proportion. You would damn a whole communist movement because Stalin has a wart on his nose. He has, you know. I told him how to treat it when I was there. Not a soul had the courage to notice it, and so he thought he looked as the posters depicted him. And he thinks himself a bit of a Shavian because his courtiers laugh at the feeblest pun."

"I thought Stalin had a sense of humour."

"Rather Victorian and old-fashioned, as petticoats and drawers must appear to a girl wearing slacks."

"I wonder how *you* appeared to him?"

"Very much as a schoolmaster appears to an old boy of the school. He dreamt of me as tall and athletic but met a decrepit old man who didn't understand a word of Russian. I pretended it was a wonderful meeting but two great people rarely make pleasant company, especially when one of them turns out to be ordinary."

"Do you think you would have been happy in Russia?"

"Well, I might have proved the exception to the rule and have avoided a bad end. I still have to find out what happened to Gorki. Not a single story I have heard sounds sense to me. However, this is beside the point. A movement has to move on all fours if it is to get a move on; and it has to struggle through a tunnel and be thankful for a chink of light. Gandhi's favourite hymn is 'Lead Kindly Light' and mine is 'The Bells of Hell':



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'The bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling  
for you and not for me.  
For me the Angels sing-a-ling-a-ling.  
They've got the goods for me.  
O death where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling?  
O grave thy victory?  
The bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling  
for you and not for me.'

You want the clock to strike twelve all the time even when it is one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, etc., etc."

He sang these numbers rapidly in crescendo and laughed aloud at the end of it. The sight of the gate had obviously acted as wine to him. He had not had such a tonic as Shaw's Corner for years. It was as potent as a new portrait. It was indeed the Gate of Paradise.

All kinds of suggestions were quickly forthcoming for embellishing it. The words should be painted in luminous gold to stand out when Ayot was lost in the wilderness of night; two lamps should crown the brick columns and like kindly lights lead people through the enfolding gloom; two great masks might decorate the entrance. . . . Not a day passed without a practical suggestion. The thought of a crest above the lettering intrigued him and he showed one or two he designed. He thought of this motto: 'I came, I laughed, I conquered.'

He quickly altered it to: 'I conquered, I laughed, I went.' The Gate of Paradise had its first day spoilt by an anonymous person writing on the brick: 'Little Jack Horner.'

On May the first Saint Joan returned to Ayot Saint Lawrence. Two strong men lifted her from a pantechnicon and placed her on the tree trunk which was to be her permanent position. Here she could take in the whole sweep of the lovely countryside. There was no celebration. G.B.S. lay asleep in his dining room and I did not want to wake him. By him lay a review open at a page with a full-page photograph of Bernard Shaw. He opened his eyes, however, and told me that he had just awakened from a fearful dream that he was being buried alive.

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"Are you free to go for a walk with me?" he asked, obviously finding it difficult to throw off the dream.

"You have a visitor," I said.

"Who is it? I don't want visitors."

"St. Joan."

"Every usherette thinks herself a St. Joan. Send for the police."

We walked down the steps and along the narrow path and when he caught sight of the bronze his heart went to it as Jacob's heart to Rachel.

There is no greater satisfaction an artist can have than to know that a work is appreciated. It was difficult for G.B.S. to say so openly at first. He teased and he tortured until we stopped thinking about the sculpture. Then he came round and begged forgiveness for his churlishness and informed us that he had special folders printed to be sent to everybody of importance to tell them what he thought of the sculpture. He was always taking photographs of it and found the expression changed with every change of light. No sculpture had ever gone through such a critical scrutiny.

"Art is the purest form of love," he said to me as we both stood by it. "I don't know what it is, but when one feels deeply, one has to fall back on clichés. I am as excited as a young lover. The rejuvenation of the world will only come through idol-worship."

## Chapter Seventeen

I WAS glad that G.B.S. now had another to commune with. I don't know whether he tried to convert her to communism or whether he already regarded her as a fellow-traveller but I noticed that he stopped beating trees. Whenever I passed through the gate I knew where to find him: it was with Joan.

An auction was announced of the furniture and effects of nearby Lamer Park, Wheathampstead, and I asked G.B.S. whether he was going.

"If you come across something nice for sixpence, get it and I'll give you sevenpence for it. But meditate before you speculate."

We looked through the catalogue and were relieved to find that Epstein's 'Christ' was not for sale.

"It will probably go into store," G.B.S. said.

I told G.B.S. how I attended an auction many years back in a remote village and among the things to be disposed of were many large Buddhas. It was a strange sight to see the villagers going home, each carrying a Buddha to take the place of the aspidistra.

"And did they all become vegetarians as the result of it?" G.B.S. asked. "Art is the finest teacher. If there is one thing I'd like to see it is *Monsieur Verdoux*. There has been no comedian like Chaplin."

"Then you must see it."

"Nonsense. I am too old to go to a theatre or a cinema. I'll fall asleep and it won't do for the people to see me. No, I have given up cycling, swimming and speaking and now I must give up theatre-going. Good-bye to all that and good riddance."

I explained that it was our intention to bring the Mountain to Mahomet.

"Nonsense. You'll need an army of engineers, mechanics and a shuttle service to the village inn. All for an old man to watch the murder of one wife after another. Come, come, you have no sense of proportion. I'm going to have a notice outside my gate:

## Shaw's Corner

### No more Mountains

(signed) Mahomet.

The last person who threatened to bring the mountain to Mahomet was Jim Larkin: he threatened to come over with the whole of Dublin to pay homage to Ireland's noblest son. That would have meant drinks all round and not a bottle of whisky to be had anywhere. They mistook me for the Pay-Boy of the Western World."

"Right, you will see *Monsieur Verdox* the earliest moment we can get it here. You will see it in my sitting-room."

"When I hear you say the word 'right' in that emphatic way, I know you are going to do an outrageous wrong, in the same way as when anyone looks at me candidly when making an assertion, I know at once he is lying. All the same, if you can get the film it would certainly be a change in a dull routine existence. Only do it quickly for tomorrow I die."

He did not die and was in the highest spirits when the news of Sidney Webb's death came through. I was sitting with him, glancing through a letter he had written 'far too extreme for the reactionary young' when he was called to the telephone to hear of his friend's death.

"My turn next," he said and asked me what I thought of the letter. He sat down and started jotting a few notes on his blue pad and smiled at the thoughts that came to him.

"I'll get the old man buried in Westminster, Inca."

"In the poet's corner?"

He dismissed the location as unsuitable and went on with his writing.

"When a friend dies, he resolves into a composite image. I do not see him as old or young, working or walking, I see *him*. I wonder whether we are all seeing the same 'him'?"

G.B.S. looked up, put his pen down and seemed to be listening.

"I supposed I took to him because he was a clerk and I was a clerk. We could sit for hours together working, gathering facts, tabulating and checking. He had a passion for precision, the factual statement, cold calculating prose. I think I loved him more than I could love any woman."

## *Shaw's Corner*

I turned my glance from him.

"He gave our movement the sense of security we needed. 'I have no faith whatever in any project undertaken in desperation,' he would say. 'The moment you get the feeling that something *must* be done, then do nothing. It means fighting when you are weakest.' How right he was. He created the climate in which we worked, he was the warm Gulf Stream."

My face must have shown surprise at the metaphor.

"Oh yes, Inca. I knew him as no one else did, not even Beatrice. He felt deeply. He did not weep over the sorrows of the poor; he did not sing of a good time coming, he gave himself no time to weep or sing, he worked at his figures and his reports and changed the face of the earth."

He must have felt that he was not expressing himself adequately, for he stopped dead and seemed to regard his friend anew.

"There was always an unembarrassed good understanding between Sidney and myself: we fitted perfectly. We were both cycling by Beachy Head when he had one of his fainting fits and fell and would have rolled down the cliff edge, if I hadn't the presence of mind to put myself in front of him. When he came to, we continued our discussion just where we left off. It would not have mattered very much if we had both gone. Nature always supplies not only enough of whatever and whoever is necessary but in sufficient excess to permit of a choice."

This incident brought to his mind a whole series of incidents and he particularly enjoyed telling how Beatrice heard him orate for the first time at Seaham where her husband was the Labour candidate. After the meeting she went up to G.B.S. and said almost angrily: "If I knew you were such a spellbinder, I would have used you more in the movement instead of letting you waste your talent on writing plays."

"Beerbohm Tree, however, did not care for me as a speaker. We were both leaving a meeting one day where I had spoken. Suddenly we both heard the jolly sound of the Salvation Army band and we followed them up the street. Beerbohm said: 'Give me pageants, Mr. Shaw, not speeches. I want to march, display my glory, not sit and listen to futile twaddle.'"

## Shaw's Corner

I had really come in to tell him that the preparations for showing Charlie Chaplin's film were now complete but felt at the moment that it would be out of keeping with the news he had just heard. It was surprising that I had forgotten that the attitude of G.B.S. to death and distress was not as other people's. But he himself brought up the film, half sceptical, half hopeful.

"You've come to tell me that *Monsieur Verdoux* is off! Never raise the expectations of an old man. He is like a child in that respect. I was looking forward to the study of a gentleman."

When I informed him that his gloomy prognostication was unfounded, in fact everything was now ready, G.B.S. became extra voluble and one story followed another. Once he had overheard two men discussing him. He was behind a hedge at the back of his garden and they could not have known that he was there.

"What is the good of calling him a saint? He isn't a saint and he isn't a blond beast. He is between the two, an hermaphrodite."

Of course, it was difficult to distinguish between a story of the imagination and a story of fact, but he told it with pride.

"They must have been visitors to the village but they made no attempt to see me." This puzzled him. "When I die there will be no reason for coming to Ayot Saint Lawrence at all," he added as if lulling the village into sleep.

Then he told of another conversation he had once overheard:

"Poor old man, he's got one foot in the grave."

"Nothing to worry about. Everything always comes up smiling with him."

"I once heard Morris saying," G.B.S. recalled, "that it was his highest ambition to paint a nude where every limb is seen smiling. He was convinced that every part of the body smiled, especially the behind."

This precipitated us into a discussion of contemporary art. It was a subject which brought forth the wildest statements from G.B.S. I suppose he felt as they do at horse fairs that it is a compliment to the customer to start at an exaggerated figure and gradually work downward.

## *Shaw's Corner*

"You might as well set armless people to drive cars as a modern artist to paint pictures. The principle seems to be to give a dog a good name and hang him. You go out, seek a person who has no sense of beauty and has nothing to communicate, if he has atrophy of the eye all the better, set him up as a master and watch the public being fooled. The whole thing is a racket."

G.B.S. obviously felt that he missed nothing by not being able to go to the pleasant little galleries dotted round Bond Street. I showed him excellent reproductions of contemporary work and he was not moved. Each work brought forth a scathing comment. He obviously regarded the whole thing as a leg-pull.

"An angry young husband called Rickett  
Said: 'Turn yourself round and I'll kick it;  
You have painted my wife  
And called it "Still Life"  
Do you think, Mr. Smith, it is cricket?' "

"How on earth is the true artist to emerge?" I asked.

"I had to kick very hard, I tell you. The lamb had to pose as a bull before he was permitted into the china shop. There must have been much better dramatists than myself who refused to strip and tease. They did everything to keep me down: their purr was worse than their bite."

He described the mumbo-jumbo of aesthetics, its high priests, its ritual, its mystic verbiage.

"I would not abolish these mystic rites, as I would not abolish the priest," G.B.S. declared. "Were I an Irish priest, I should redeem the dead from purgatory for a cash consideration."

"Yet you think God made the world as an artist?"

"The object of life is pure thought and look at the daily ritual, the mumbo-jumbo of eating, excreting, loving and toiling."

As he no doubt intended, I went to the other extreme and put the case for the modern idiom. When I finished, he smiled and said: "Why give them the benefit of a philosophy? I agree with every word you've uttered and have said the same things myself but don't apply it to the empty and the ugly. Was it Ruskin who said that a world without art was like a house without windows? Now we've gone to the other

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extreme of having all window and no house, art without a world. Of course, if you are going to plead that the world is empty and ugly, that's another matter. I don't think so and you don't think so."

"There are very few faces worth painting."

"The mugs of today are the most hideous in the history of the human race, I agree. It reminds me of a story Walter Crane told me. Watts painted his portrait and he painted William Morris and a host of other handsome men. A rich wool merchant also asked Watts to paint him and told the artist that he wanted himself done like Crane. 'Come tomorrow and you'll have it,' said Watts. 'Don't you want me to sit?' the hideous merchant asked. 'No, I want you to fly,' Watts answered."

"Watts had a sense of humour?"

"Ellen Terry told me that he had a very strong sense of humour but it was crushed by too much kindness. If I were surrounded by humanitarians, I'd soon lose mine. There's nothing worse for an intellectually creative man than to be haunted by a feeling of perpetual security. As you know, he ultimately took to teetotalism and died of it."

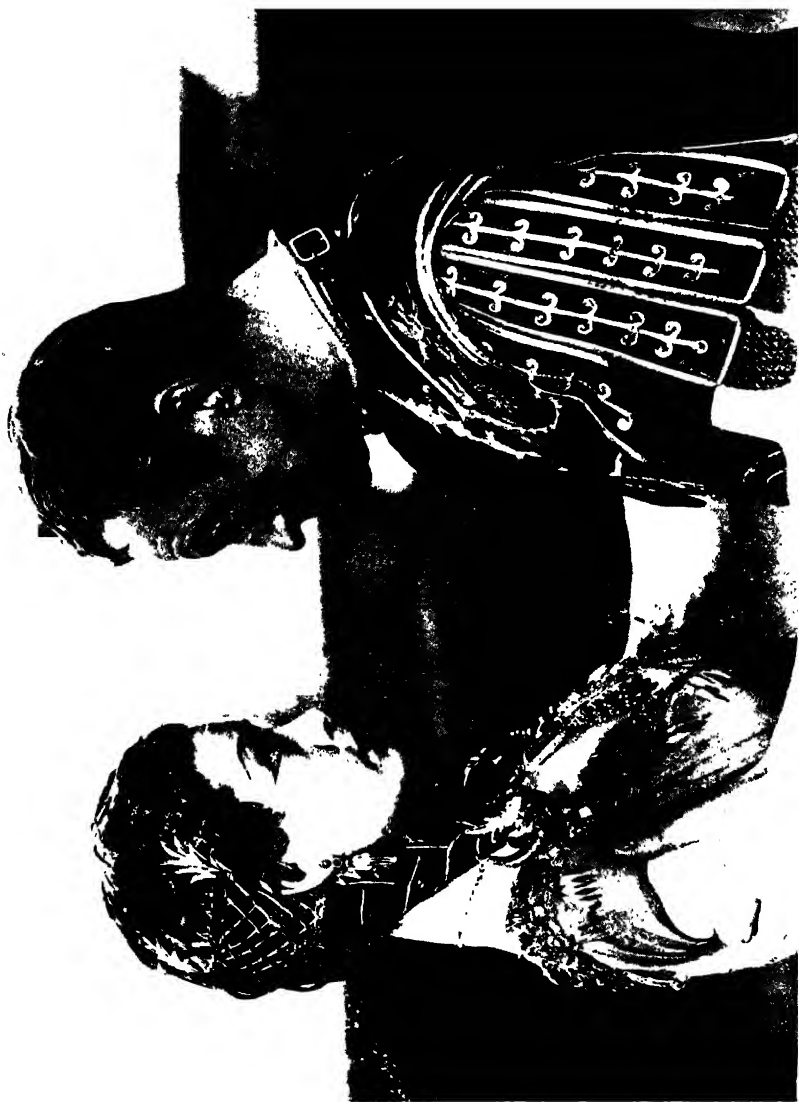
"Watts has gone right out now. A painting of his sold for a pound or two the other day."

"I wonder how these moderns would have portrayed St. Joan? A triangle hitched on to a circle to reveal her pure form."

He drew an abstract pattern and asked me if it would do as St. Joan. Soon the page was full of abstractions.

"I remember Isadora Duncan saying to me after some exquisite Greek posing, that there has never been any pure form since Phidias. And she unrobed to show me what she meant by pure form. In those days it wasn't abstract. 'Between us,' she said, 'we can produce an amalgam of pure thought and form.' Shavius wasn't willing. I told her I was married. 'Marriage is a permanent contract, mine would be no more than a temporary contact,' she pleaded. You see what an important part words play in human relationships. Her argument almost sounded convincing because 'contract' and 'contact' were similar. It would have convinced another person but I had a meeting to address and so it was purely an abstract question to me."





*Vivien Leigh and  
Claude Rains in  
"Caesar and Cleopatra"*



*Gabriel Fauré at home*

## *Chapter Eighteen*

G. B.S. begged of me to come in and help him because he was having a young lady visitor that day and he felt he could not tackle her on his own. When I came in I found two young ladies there, very embarrassed and very shy. G.B.S. was holding forth as to an audience of fifty.

"All heroes are funny," he was saying, "I've known many and every time I think of them I want to laugh. It isn't that this one is fat and that one is thin, this one has long hair and that one has no hair; that kind of thing has never amused me. The fact that a hero has to have a lot of furniture round him, sip tea and do a thousand ordinary prosaic things causes me endless amusement. It's the wrong setting for a hero. I don't know how it came into the head of man to rise above circumstance."

I noticed that the two young ladies were doing their utmost to suppress a giggling fit. One dared not look at the other.

"He must have failed at the first attempt and tried again, that's the miracle of existence. Do you know what's wrong with the world? We act to avoid thought and argue to avoid doing."

G.B.S. was making a tremendous effort to impress his young visitors.

"Did you paint that?" one of them asked pointing to the portrait of Charlotte.

"If I could paint, I'd never rest satisfied until I got the green of her eyes. They were a wonderful green. Unfortunately, I'm not an artist. It is the one thing I regret."

"We found it very difficult to get here," the other said. "First we had to travel right across London to get to King's Cross and then we had to walk all the way from Welwyn. We thought that we'd never get here. I'd hate to live in the country."

"I'm having a special leaflet printed on how to get here. I've been thinking of doing it for some time but I mean to get down to it one day. There is no difficulty in finding my place once you reach Ayot St. Lawrence."

"We went to the very big house first of all and they directed us here."

"Did you say that you were marrying next week?" G.B.S. asked. "There's nothing, nothing whatever I can tell you about marriage except that it is an awful business especially for the woman. I've never been able to discover why women marry."

"All women want to marry."

This challenge was enough to set G.B.S. going. "Nature has so devised life that all creatures, especially human beings, want to do only what is bad for them. Look at the kind of homes people have, the food they eat, the books they read, the cinemas, the clothes. It isn't entirely due to ignorance because cultured people are no better."

"It's a choice between having a home of my own and spending the rest of my life in an office."

"In an office there are regular working hours, at least, but there is never an end to the drudgery of a home," G.B.S. said. He pulled himself up and, changing his tone, added: "Marry by all means. No woman has ever regretted becoming a mother and that's the very thing women try to avoid."

"I don't think I'd care to have children in the world as it is."

"If my mother had thought like that, you would not have been sitting here," G.B.S. retorted and the visitors roared with laughter. G.B.S. relaxed; he had got his laugh at last.

He saw them respectfully to the gate and felt pleased when they admired the lettering. They walked down the lane laughing aloud at what they had seen and what they had heard. It was as well, for they had a very long walk before them.

"In my young days one could discuss anything with women, but now one must watch one's step. Do you think I was too daring?" G.B.S. asked as we sat down again. "I didn't know that she would have a chaperone with her or I would not have worried you to come."

"Who were they?"

"One of them is the great-grand-daughter of one of my staunchest supporters in St. Pancras when I stood for the Council. He was a grand man who lived in a cellar: a worker by day and a socialist by night. He was full of ideas and more than one of the

things he said found its way into my plays. I still have a suit he made for me. He was not a good tailor but he was so independent that it was the only way I could help him."

He tripped across devastating world wars into the hovel of an anonymous dreamer who sang of the good times that were coming if we waited a little longer.

I do not know why he was so nervous about meeting a young lady considering that my daughters always went to him unchaperoned. Ruth was seeing him almost every day now, reading to him, walking with him, and listening to him as he played the church organ; and Theodora's stage designs were a continuous source of delight to him.

"There is much more of the woman in me than the man," he said. "The women in my plays are flesh and blood, the others are ideas. I am always sorry for the woman who comes across a man for the first time: it was hell for Eve and . . . Charlotte. It was male conceit to make the crucified one a male. What will happen when women see through men and refuse to marry? I remember receiving a leaflet from a Chinese organization asking all women to refuse to touch men until all war is abolished. The Chinese have hit upon a good idea and I mean to write a play round a lie-down strike."

His eyes gleamed as he contemplated the situation. "Do you know, Inca, a woman has sent me a letter informing me that she cannot visualize the intimate life of my characters. She can always tell by looking at a person, the kind of intimacy he or she indulges in, but never with my characters. I had never looked at them from that angle, have you?"

"I quite understand her difficulty," I answered.

"I always thought that people went away knowing more about my people than their neighbours. I am really disturbed."

"They do know more, but not enough."

"Come, come, there's a limit to human curiosity. It is as well for the world that Freud did not take to writing plays."

## Chapter Nineteen

THE transformation of our drawing room into a perfectly equipped cinema was the work of a few men as eager and excited as G.B.S. himself. When they heard for whom this was being prepared they thought that a more frivolous programme would have suited the old man better than a series of horrible murders which only the young could take in with choc-ices and love-making.

Charlie Chaplin's reputation had rested on his greatness as a clown, through which he expressed the pathos of the little man. In *Monsieur Verdoux* he had abandoned the baggy pants and had become a gentleman who, to keep up his respectability, had to commit one murder after another. The Shavian dilemma intrigued Bernard Shaw.

G.B.S. came in that morning looking older than ever, a truly aged man. He staggered up the steps and fell back in the armchair exhausted.

"I must have done the short distance in record time. I came down on top gear."

"You should not have hurried, G.B.S."

"Do you think that an old man is all philosophic calm? He has his little excitements, you know. I am a small boy again."

Of course, he had to tell how as a small boy he was first taken to an opera and his mistook the people in evening dress for the players and wondered when they would stand up and sing. He could not understand why he was made to sit with his back to the singers.

"This is a most uneconomic proposition," G.B.S. said to one of the men. "It is the playwright's nightmare that not a soul will come to see his play."

"It must give Charles Chaplin great satisfaction to know that in a far-away village in England, there is a pool of darkness in a world of sunlight and in that pool bathes G.B.S."

"The Red Sea," G.B.S. retorted. "The last time I saw a

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Chaplin film I wept so much that I almost gave myself away. I was supposed to possess a heart of concrete. I have seen hare-bells break through concrete."

The room darkened, G.B.S. folded his arms and beamed with pleasure. When he saw the incinerator with the smoke of the the burning body issuing from it, he said: "This is going to be good." The love-making was particularly pleasing to him and every time a wealthy woman yielded to the courting, G.B.S. shook with laughter. Monsieur Verdoux's home life with his sweet crippled wife for whom he laboured so hard and went to such lengths to keep the home simple and loving; his small son whom he taught to be a vegetarian and love all sentient things, moved G.B.S. deeply.

"Chaplin is still the superb artist, the great pantomimic, the tragic clown, though the baggy trousers have been sent to the cleaners. I do not blame him for being up against modern society after fourteen years of murder."

When G.B.S. was informed that the film had not done too well, he replied: "Then they take the clown seriously. That's one up on me. A man takes his career in his hands whenever he utters a truth. As they have long ago established that I am incapable of telling the truth I can say anything without detriment to my enormous success. It does not matter because what I say as a lie today they know as the truth tomorrow. Charlie Chaplin is only saying what I have said all along, and he is suffering for it. But it doesn't matter, for the joy of getting the truth off his chest far outweighs the harm that will befall him.

'Life is a jest, all things do show it;  
I thought so once; and now I know it.'

Our journey to Shaw's Corner was a very slow affair. The film was as strong liquor to him. Every two steps he stopped with a new argument, a new story, a new memory. He told us of how he found himself one evening among a lot of brilliant young men. It was a meeting of young Fabians:

"It was a simple matter for them to be brilliant because all they had to do was to read my latest pronouncement, utter it as

their own and it was taken as oracular. As an argumentative person, I had to contradict them. I was at a disadvantage because they had right on their side. But it is one thing to say the right thing and another to defend it. They at once gave all the wrong reasons and I wiped the floor with them. I was accused of hypocrisy and duplicity and almost hissed out of the room. You see, these clever young men did not believe that I said what *I* meant, they preferred to think that I said what *they* meant. When I was a brilliant boy, I cut a centipede into fifty parts and thought I had created fifty bipeds."

When we ultimately reached the gate G.B.S. eyed it with admiration and thought the letters were maturing.

"I could have called it Crippen's Corner or Turpin's Rest but Shaw's Corner sounds less parochial; at one bound this little place has become the centre of the world, the hub of the universe, the haven of pure thought."

A young fellow was careering round on a motorcycle and passed us every few minutes.

"Who is that young man?" G.B.S. asked. "He's been haunting Ayot for the last few weeks."

I told him of the remarkable resurrection of this youth, how he was reported missing but the mother would not believe he was dead and now he had returned: he had been a prisoner of war in Japan all this time.

"I don't know why the young are interested in me. I only sit on my backside and write books. When I was his age, I had only just arrived in England, a boor among aristocrats, a bore among democrats. I was afraid to meet a soul. Within a few years, I was already riding a tandem tricycle with one of England's distinguished philosophers. I am sorry now I had to dispose of it, for we could both have used it along these narrow winding lanes."

I suggested that the tandem tricycle would be far too slow for him. "Soon we would all be travelling faster than light," I said.

"Yes, we'll set out on a day's excursion and come back the previous night," G.B.S. replied. "That has already happened to me, in fact it is always happening to me. I travel so fast in my



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thought that it is always a shock to find when I return that I am back to a day before yesterday."

In the late afternoon, G.B.S. again came in to us and found the room cleared of all impedimenta. He called our attention to the fact that seeing the film cost him a veritable fortune because he could have written half a dozen articles in that time.

"I found invitations awaiting me to write on: 'Vegetation in Ayot St. Lawrence', probably a misprint for 'Vegetating in Ayot', another subject: 'Talks with the Dead', it's you who should write that; and a third subject: 'What it feels like to be reaching the century', as if a person over ninety has any feelings. He is asleep most of the time and when he is not asleep is afraid he will soon fall asleep. I am offered two hundred pounds for each of those articles and so I paid six hundred pounds to see *Monsieur Verdoux*. If I told exactly what it felt like to be old, nobody would publish it, but then if I told exactly how I felt about anything nobody would publish it."

"Have you had any articles rejected?" I asked.

"I myself have rejected them. I don't want to be laughed at. Anyhow, I don't think we've developed the proper technique for telling the truth: we write as if time is horizontal, flowing on like a stream; but it is probably vertical or spiral. It isn't only a person of ninety talking to you at this moment but a boy of five and a man of fifty, fully conscious human beings. On most occasions the man of ninety is not even present."

He thought that he wasn't making himself clear although I understood perfectly what he was getting at.

"I see consciousness as an onion with the present as the dry protecting skin," he said, hoping that the familiar image might bridge our two minds. "You probably think, Inca, that I am going out of my mind. In every generation there are only two or three people who are alive and they talk a language none can understand."

I told him of a request from a person of his own age who had flown over from America with the hope of seeing him.

"I don't want to meet old people; they only make me feel twice as old. He shouldn't be flying about like a butterfly at his time of life. He lives on a mountain peak and I live on a mountain peak and though we may have the same scene beneath us and the

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same sky above us, there is no communication. I don't want to meet another soul in the world."

Yet how glad he was when he met other people at our place, when he could take out his box of tricks and entertain them. One story followed another and life was young again. Although we had heard all the stories over and over again, they never wearied us. . . .

One visitor, however, refused to respond. Story followed reminiscence, verse followed song but not a word and not a smile. G.B.S. sang:

" 'I've a sister that's married a squire,  
She'll ne'er look, nor speak unto me;  
Because in this world she's much 'igher,  
And rides in 'er carriage so free  
And I try to be honest and upright  
And do all the good that I can,  
And I try all I know to get on in the world,  
And to prove to my friends I'm a man.' "

Really exasperated, G.B.S. exclaimed: "You don't care a fig for mine, I'll give you a penny for your thoughts."

Our friend did not reply.

"I know perfectly well what it is: the young do not care for the old and don't like to be reminded there is such a state as old age," G.B.S. said, putting on his cape.

"I am sorry, sir," our young friend replied, "I see nothing whatever to laugh at."

"Oh, I see," G.B.S. said. "This is a case for a plumber, not for a psychiatrist. The sink of humour is stopped up. I was like you when I was young. Every time my mother saw me she pulled a long face and groaned. I deliberately set out to cultivate a sense of humour by extolling my weaknesses and hiding my virtues. In this way I learnt the greatest lesson life can teach: never to reveal your virtue if you wish to retain it."

"You have succeeded," our visitor remarked.

"I don't know so much," G.B.S. said. "My humour was a thermostatic contrivance to keep a continuous supply of warm conversation. I once heard my previous housekeeper remark:

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'Our hot water in this house is natural. You turn the tap on and there it is.' She thereupon proceeded to demonstrate to the impressed villager. She did not know what it cost me to produce this 'natural' supply. I paid for my humour in shocking disabling headaches till I was seventy."

"And the result of it all is that we do not know how you stand with regard to anything," our friend said.

"Think of me as the celestial scavenger, if you can," G.B.S. replied, a little put out by the lack of appreciation. "I stand in the middle of the road clearing away the ideological mess of centuries. It could not be done by sitting on the fence, I assure you."

"So you think you have destroyed the Tower of Babel?"

"No, I have spoilt the Feast of Babylon. While I kept the merry-makers amused, the words were being written on the wall. Now please leave me out of it. You can start flinging your muck on the road again if you so desire."

Our friend did not accompany us to Shaw's Corner.

"I like him," G.B.S. said at his gate. "He is the driftwood that denotes the turn of the tide. It's time it turned. It has been going in one direction far too long."

I did not mark the turn of the tide. People still laughed as heartily as ever at his most flippant jokes and the young, however much they tried, could not by-pass his exuberant personality. Ezra Pound may have dismissed him as trivial but G.B.S. somehow survived that penetrating analysis. Probably it was the presence of G.B.S. in the world that revitalized his work. He did not care what happened after his death. To have grown old and watched generation after generation flocking to see his plays was a foretaste of immortality and it was enough.

"The man couldn't stand your unbounded optimism," I explained.

"I, an optimist! Why, I despair of the human race! I've given it up long ago. I thought for a while that it was emerging out of savagery, but I found that it was I who was emerging and not the human race."

I laughed.

"You're just the person to laugh at other people's misfortunes," he rebuked me.

## Chapter Twenty

WE were walking through the village and thought that it had never looked so peaceful and beautiful when a woman rushed from her cottage towards us and breathlessly informed us that Gandhi had been assassinated. We walked on in silence. The image which came up in the glow of the sunlight was of an unassuming gentle being with a smile of content and not of sorrow.

When I was with G.B.S. in the evening, the telephone bell rang continuously. The whole world was battering him for a word on the murder and he could find no words.

"What on earth am I to say?" he asked me helplessly. He needed a quip to circle the world. I suggested the last sentence in *St. Joan*:

"O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy saints?"

But he dismissed it. "They don't want texts, they want a witty remark. What about 'You have paid him the highest compliment'?—but tyrants have been assassinated. No, it won't do. 'Gandhi had a claim to immortality without having to be shot.' Too wordy. 'Saints have a right to live.' He was obviously getting nearer. Then his eyes twinkled and his hairs almost stood up with happiness. He had found the satisfying quip: 'It is dangerous to be good.'

I heard him dictating to an Agency: "It is dangerous to be good. His life has not been cut short but extended indefinitely."

When he put the receiver down he told me that the lunatic at the other side misunderstood him. He had taken his message as: 'He was strange and he was rude.' "How Gandhi would have laughed. He must be cracking a joke at this moment with *St. Joan*."

G.B.S. again told me of his last chat with Gandhi:

"When I came, he was sitting in state on a huge upholstered

chair. His cushioned seat on the floor was empty. I said: 'Mr. Gandhi, won't you please sit on the floor as you always do at home?' He laughed and obliged by squatting in his usual way, cross-legged, and I sat likewise. Instantly we became friends. There are two ways of becoming friends: one by digging together, the other by sitting cross-legged together."

"But you have not met since?" I asked, for this incident which he was recounting happened twenty years ago.

"There is no need for people like Gandhi and myself to meet more often than once in twenty-five years. Well, now the fun will begin. Take away the only man in the East with a sense of humour and what is left? Until now, I had the Western people only on my shoulders but now the Easterns have been added. I suppose I'll have to postpone my final disintegration to a later date, being the last surviving giant."

I asked G.B.S. what he thought was the essential difference between East and West.

"When the Westerns make a mistake, they immediately justify it, when the Easterns make a mistake, they are sorry for themselves. The Westerns think that all saints are fools and therefore the Westerns never learn anything.

"There is no equivalent to Mahatma in the English language.

"I had to invent one: Superman. But who would ever dream of calling me Superman Shaw except as a term of ridicule? They thought I was growing senile when I dabbled in religion. . . . The Eastern, believing his saint to be wise, remains a learner. The Indians learnt as much from Gandhi's silences as from his sayings! Who would ever listen to me if I were silent?"

We listened to the wireless and messages were read from the great men of the world. G.B.S. waited impatiently until his was read and then switched off.

"What shameless falsehoods they'll say of me when I die," G.B.S. exclaimed.

I said I thought Leon Blum expressed the feelings of the world: "I never saw Gandhi, I do not know his language, I never set foot in his country and yet I feel the same sorrow as if I had been near and dear. The Earth is in mourning."

"The French are articulate in sorrow. We do not know how

to weep," G.B.S. whispered gloomily. Then he brightened up and said: "Gandhi was like myself in this respect: he never cared to be photographed and yet he was, barring one, the most photographed man in the world. We were both extremely modest, but hid our modesty under a bushel of publicity."

Again and again the telephone bell rang but nothing would induce him to answer it.

"Tell them I am dead," he said. "That will keep them going for a few years."

Again he switched on the wireless but immediately switched off when a comedian uttered a stale tag.

"I can't stand the heavy light-heartedness of the radio. From the way the audience roars, the performers must be always slipping over banana skins. The thing that puzzles me is how they get the bananas. I can only conclude that they are all infants."

He took a sweet from a jar and soon brought out denture and sweet.

"I've been asking them to buy sweets with soft centres but the moment I put one in my mouth, I have to disgorge my synthetic interior. All my life I have been showing my teeth but they were no more mine than the snow on the mountain peak is the mountain's."

"Gandhi refused to have artificial teeth," I said.

"I did not share with him his objection to machinery. Like Russia, India will have to Americanize or go under. The form of organization is another matter. I have no faith in governments by nobodies elected by everybody. I want government by Mahatmas. The Welfare State is impossible with an Illfare constitution. Gandhi and I were exceptional people, exceptional in so far as we could see ahead, we had a wider mental range obscured by those who did not possess it. We used to think that it was our business to point the way but Monsieur Tout le Monde has no use for signposts."

He stopped and smiled benignly. "If you find me talking sense, you must stop me at once. Old people know things which they cannot pass on, dare not pass on!"

"How would the Mahatmas carry the people with them, even if they agreed among themselves?" I asked.

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"Awe, awe, awe. Who had a greater following than Gandhi? I don't suppose half a dozen people understood him. The people born to govern possess the mysterious quality."

"My dear G.B.S., I can see you have learnt nothing from the recent war. I almost feel you were disappointed with the result."

"There is no blessing on your generation. These are the fallow years of the soul. Instead of being proud citizens of Utopia, you behave like village bumpkins."

I put in a word for my generation who have to tackle a world enlarged beyond human comprehension.

"What utter nonsense! You drive me to despair, Inca. The world has always been beyond human comprehension. That is why we have created a God after our own image to make it bearable. Otherwise we would be stunned into insensibility. When things grew too difficult I used to thank God I had *myself* to cling to. The two things that make life bearable are God and humour: the creation of a God has made life a little more intimate and a sense of humour has made this intimacy possible."

For many weeks after that we did not see G.B.S. He thought it necessary to explain his absence by the amazing upsurge of interest in his phonetic alphabet. He had so many trivial points to answer on the subject, points that 'any youngster of thirty or forty could answer standing on his head'. Above all he wanted a shapely alphabet, a female alphabet, as he put it.

"You must remember that the letters are the first contact with written thought. Why shouldn't the first contact be as shapely as a mother's face? They are also the child's first contact with abstract shapes. I'll never forget my fascination with the letter 'I'. I was a lover of abstract shapes long before Picasso uttered his first shriek. When I failed in art, my obsession with shapes made me take to writing."

As he spoke, an old parody of a poem trickled slowly through my head and I told it to G.B.S.:

"All play with toys: with soldiery Wells;  
The Webbs with figures cold and stark;  
Shaw with letters shaped into a dream;  
Gandhi with men's souls!"

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G.B.S. pondered a while for a rhyme with 'stark' and came out with:

"Gandhi with men's souls ! Oh, what a lark !"

This simple rhyme gave him immense satisfaction.



## *Chapter Twenty-One*

“ALL I know is that when I am least aware of myself, I do my best work; and when I do my best work, they all say they are more aware of me than of my creations,” G.B.S. said.

I was telling him that I had been with a revolutionary modern whom I found so simple and gentle that he did not seem of this earth. This led us to the relationship between the creator and the created.

“You are your greatest creation,” I reminded G.B.S.

“You don’t know how tired I am of myself just now. I want to be twenty, not ninety odd,” he answered impatiently. “Now that I have learnt how to be truly irresponsible I am too old to enjoy it.”

“In love?” I asked.

“Love is irresponsibility raised to a fine art. It was left to me to raise fine art to the level of irresponsibility!”

“You mean, of course, that you would like to be twenty but with your present knowledge?” I said.

“I mean that I hate watching myself decay. I am only just learning how to live. I received a letter today offering me a small fortune to write a scenario with a very old man as the chief character. I was given instructions as to how the old man was to behave: he was to be a cantankerous old dodderer, a wasp caught in a match box. You see they knew more about old age than a mere novice like myself. I am up against it for the first time and so know nothing about it. They asked me because I write best about the things I know least about.”

“Have you agreed to do it?” I asked.

“What is the good of agreeing to anything specific? I write as the spirit moves me. I may set out to depict an old man and find I am writing about young people in love. I have to complete each aspect of my life imaginatively. I used to think that I was a train rushing rapidly from station to station, from childhood to

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youth and youth to manhood and so on; but now I see that I am the station and all these different trains, childhood, youth and manhood, are passing me and unloading, for my porters to collect, a lot of useless luggage. I don't know how to deal with the stuff the last train has deposited: it seems to have come from an ice region. There are no instructions from Above."

"I realize your difficulty."

"How can you? You have no idea of the limitations under which I write, the constant search for the right kind of distinction, whether of style, or thought, or humour or vulgarity, how very nicely I have to ascertain the truth in order that I may find the true error with such precision as to make it appear that it was the first thing that came into the head of the character into whose mouth I put it. No, I can't do anything. . . . I am finished."

We felt he needed a change and remembering how G.B.S. had enjoyed the private showing of *Monsieur Verdoux*, we arranged for him to see a famous French film. He had expressed an interest in Jean-Louis Barrault, the French actor who was to play Hamlet at the Edinburgh Festival and about whom Bridie had written to him in glowing terms, and that actor was starring in this film.

While we were waiting for the film to be shown, G.B.S. mentioned that an American proposed transplanting Shaw's Corner, brick by brick, across the Atlantic. It seemed to me that he thoroughly enjoyed the film and never did I notice the least sign of flagging interest. When it was over, he expressed his disapproval in such scathing terms that I thought he was back at the Lyceum watching Henry Irving.

"Did you really think it a good film?" he asked.

"The best I have seen for years."

"Well, your Shavian education stopped at films. I know all the tricks of the trade and refuse to be taken in. It's the kind of play I laughed out of court in the nineties and I never dreamt I would have to sit through another in *my* nineties. It only proves what little influence I have had. *Monsieur Verdoux* made me feel quite hopeful again but with this dreadful film you have sent me back into the doldrums. I tell myself much better stories. No more films for me."

Later in the day he told me the story he was telling himself.

"I am putting together a few bits and pieces about myself. The more I reveal the less I give away."

As we were walking we noticed that strangers were carefully surveying the field facing his shelter and the thought came to us that the intention was to put up a prefabricated colony in the neighbourhood and we were horrified.

"I don't want the sound of people," G.B.S. declared. "It's soothing to hear the lambs but if people invade this place, I'll fly from here. I don't want them. Why can't they let me die in peace?"

"It hasn't happened yet," I assured him.

"It has. I'm never wrong. Why are those people taking measurements? I'll have a high wall built round my estate and I'll shut myself in. People have grown so ugly that I don't want to see them again."

I promised to find out what was happening. We approached the strangers and were assured that there was no intention to build on a large scale. One or two cottages for farm workers were contemplated but as long as there were no shops and cinemas people would never come. And then one of them took me aside and said: "They're dead frightened of the old man. They think he casts a spell on people. Even if we had twenty Odeons and thirty Woolworths not a soul would come."

"You ought to buy up the whole of Ayot and make it a centre for artists and writers," I suggested jocularly to G.B.S. This led to an outburst against 'vagabonds' and 'parasites' and I was sorry that I had forgotten myself.

"I'm not going to convert this simple village into a 'Discord'. There's one thing about this place: they get out of the way when they see me coming and that's how I like it. The village has done nothing for me and I've done nothing for the village. When you are my age you like nothing better than nothing."

It was very modest of G.B.S. to say that he had done nothing for the village: he had been helpful in many quiet ways. But for him the village might never have been known to the outside world. Every week-end the village lane was filled with cars and people, and during the week hikers would make a point of passing

through with the hope of seeing something more than the demolished abbey. The litter on the Green showed that the association of G.B.S. and Ayot was known the world over.

It does not pay to joke with G.B.S. For weeks he brought up argument upon argument against the proposed artist community. He worked it out as a commercial proposition and proved that it would not pay, even if they all paid their dues as regularly as stockbrokers. He proved that artists could not hope to make a living under present conditions unless they became society painters.

"As clothes are so expensive, it is a question nowadays whether the client prefers a dress to a portrait. And it must be a dress because it is necessary and a painting is not. Anyhow, I am not going to have it said that art follows the wag."

"So you prefer our village to consist of cowmen and accountants?" I said.

"Judging from the kind of work being produced, I'd say that cowmen have taken to art and accountants to literature," G.B.S. replied. "It would have been much better if artists and writers had taken to accountancy and finance. If it weren't for my early training in figures, I would have cut a sorry figure as a dramatist. There's nothing I enjoy more than doing my accounts. I find it a stimulating exercise, especially the sordid side of it. The play of economic motive fascinates me."

"That is because you are highly successful," I suggested.

"I am highly successful because I can drive a hard bargain. When it comes to business I am merciless. I pick a pocket and leave a maxim behind. And I make sure the maxim is always worth it. If you will forgive the pun, I am the first Maximillionaire."

"It's Portia who supplied the maxims not the merciless Shylock," I contended.

"The people who supply the maxims in Shakespeare's plays are always bores."

"It is true," I admitted, "that Shakespeare's maxims represented the accepted moral code of the day."

"Exactly. My maxims are delayed action bombs. They are now going off all over the place. The job of the dramatist is to create new prejudices not to perpetuate the old ones."

### *Shaw's Corner*

"And you would prefer to be surrounded by conventional people?"

"Of course, then I know exactly where I stand. If suddenly the earth began to rock and the trees to shoot fire, I'd feel dispossessed. The village has not moved for the last five hundred years and that's how I like it. None of the people here reflect my teaching. There is nothing more terrifying for a revolutionary writer than to see his thought materializing."

He looked at me, put his hand on my shoulder and smiled benignly. I understood his extremity.

"You see, I have had wide experience of my thought materializing. I've seen my plays murdered. How often have I wanted to give up because I knew that there was not a soul in the world who could portray the character? My struggle with Janet Achurch over *Candida*. Never has a man made such sacrifices for a woman of his own imagining. And the result? I was a sculptor who found a job spoiled by the material he had been using, the whole thing was always crumbling to dust. . . ."

"The fate of every visionary," I said.

"The fate of all people who have anything to communicate. Tolstoy, Ruskin, Morris. I do not know how I have remained sane. Perhaps I do know. It is because I learned early on to leave this hell for heaven at frequent intervals, to die."

He remained silent and nothing in the world would make me utter a word. I seemed to be listening to my own heart-beat.

"The frightful vacuity, the vulgarity, the superficiality, the desecration of one's dreaming and thinking, hateful, hateful, hateful. What made me take to the theatre? I wanted a cathedral and found a theatre. When I die I can hear them saying: 'It must have been the charm of his personality that made us hail him as a dramatist. He reflected his age pleasantly enough but nothing more.'"

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

I THINK he liked to feel that he was living within easy reach of two Garden Cities. They seemed to reassure him, to breathe the spirit of Sir Ebenezer Howard, their founder, the gentlest and most self-effacing of fanatics.

"Welwyn Garden City is where I get my hair cut," he would say, brushing the place aside with his hand. But he would remind me that the founder was a poor over-worked soul when he published his simple little book in 1898, that as the result of the book a Garden City Association was formed, numbering among its members artists, lawyers, merchants, judges, doctors and even a dramatist. A few years later Letchworth came into being and then Welwyn.

I knew Sir Ebenezer quite well and told G.B.S. that he had felt that the great difficulty in our living and thinking was divisionism: science versus religion, idealist versus realist, art versus industry, town versus country. . . . He broke down the division between town and country.

"The great difficulty," G.B.S. answered, "is inequality. 'I am my neighbour's superior and therefore my daughter must not marry my neighbour's son.' As long as the biological stream is polluted with this evil thought, there can be no hope for humanity. You can have two identical houses, surrounded by trees and fields and yet the people in them eaten away with uncontrollable jealousy because of this inequality. Every five years or so they should let loose an army of locusts to bring the people to their senses, to make them realize that they were all men and women fighting frantically for human life, and not blacks and pinks, proletarians and proprietors, Russians and Americans."

"But as soon as the locusts went the people would return to their old divisions," I said.

"And probably discover a thousand new ones. When I wore sandals, the simple-lifers would have nothing to do with me because I wore a hat. I used to advise the women that if they

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rebelled against those horrid high-heeled shoes they must take care to do it in very smart hats or they would never convert a soul. My wife went the whole hog before she married me but I got her back into conventional habits again. Marriage itself is such a mad thing that there is no need to spoil it by doing other mad things. One mad thing at a time but see to it that you do something mad all the time."

"And what mad enterprise are you engaged on now?" I asked.

"Growing old. Was there anything more topsy-turvy than this process of conscious decay? I loathe it and am fascinated by it. After Graham Wallas had witnessed my marriage at the Register Office, he asked me what it felt like to be married. 'Oh,' I answered, 'like having a very good set of dentures. Everything tastes better.' Old age is like having a very bad set of dentures. All things taste alike, that is, they have no taste."

I noticed he turned shyly away as he spoke to me instead of looking straight at me as he invariably did. He smiled as he surveyed the meal spread for an epicure before him.

"A carpenter without his tools, a musician without his instrument, an angel without his wings," he said, picking up an apple and putting it down again. "Do they permit prisoners to retain their dentures in prison? I wonder what Oscar Wilde did under similar circumstances."

He had addressed an envelope and could not find it. Instead of readdressing another he went searching every book and file, but without success.

"I must be growing crazy," he groaned. "I had it in my hand a minute ago."

"Why worry over a bit of paper?" I said.

"A bit of paper! I don't know what people did before paper was invented. It's paper that has set the world moving more than steam and electricity. The world moves by ideas and ideas need paper. On that piece of paper there is a name and an address and without it I cannot communicate with him. I have something to tell him, and if I don't tell it to him, it may affect the course of history."

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"His name and address are probably in *Who's Who*," I suggested.

"I don't want the bother of looking through *Who's Who*. Besides, once I've got a *Who's Who* in my hands, I can never let it go. There are names in it that take up far too much space. Have you noticed how few of them have any other amusements than shootin' and 'unting?"

"And yet you would only permit *them* to choose our rulers," I said, trying to divert his attention from the envelope.

"I would do nothing of the kind. What I maintain is that the people must choose their rulers not from the mob but from the limited supply of born Mahatmas. What we need is a sound anthropometric test and I don't suppose a dozen in *Who's Who* would pass it. Most of them are below average but with plenty of luck. By luck I mean that they have had their minds destroyed by expensive education. The man with an original mind is never permitted to rise unless he can, like myself, pretend he is only joking."

"And you think that the people could distinguish between one Mahatma and another?"

"It wouldn't matter very much whom they elected, Einstein or myself. We may not agree about anything, but we would not make a mess of things as the others have done. People who have had their minds destroyed can only destroy, they can only create conditions which they understand, war and poverty."

Again he searched for the envelope, but he had to give up the attempt at last.

"I don't suppose there are more than six letters out of the thousands and thousands I have written that were worth the trouble. You see I enjoyed writing letters because my plays and articles were written in vacuum and I liked to feel that I was a person with feelings and fancies. Only I couldn't throw off the schoolma'am in me, the don't do this and do that. I must give up writing letters or give up writing anything else. I am glad the envelope has gone; it will save a lot of futile correspondence."

Fortunately or unfortunately the envelope was found. It stood behind one of the numerous photographs on the mantelpiece. While we were talking he walked up to it, triumphantly displayed



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it to me and his mood changed at once. I was surprised to find that it was addressed to Franklin Roosevelt. The first thought that occurred to me was that it was an old envelope that must have stood behind Stalin for years but he insisted that it was the one he was looking for.

"I am afraid your note will not reach him," I said.

"Why not?"

"He is dead."

"Good, that will save me a stamp. I am always communicating with the dead. I only have to think of a person to learn that he is dead."

He tore the letter to shreds and threw it into the wastepaper basket.

"I rather liked his broadcasting voice. Most statesmen sound illiterate on the wireless but in his case there was real pathos in his voice. I felt he was a dying man when I was listening to him. The great men on the wireless always seem to be speaking from the grave. I suppose we feel responsible for the inevitable in the same way that we feel responsible for our faces, however ugly."

I asked G.B.S. what other voices he liked on the wireless.

"I can't remember names but I listen to any scientific talk that's going and they are always good but they haven't caught up with me yet. Slowly the mind is being restored to the Universe. It amuses me to hear that the scientists think that they have come to these views after long and tedious experiment, when they have really come to them in their youth by reading my books and articles. I released them from the stranglehold of Fatalism and they were free to look life in the face once more."

G.B.S. could not believe that science had gone further than what he taught fifty years ago, nor could he think that economics might have progressed since then. He always saw the world as slowly and with great difficulty catching up with him.

"When I want to know what the most brilliant minds of today are thinking, I go to my leaflets of fifty, sixty years ago," he said. "It would be fun if they were read on the wireless by a voice without an Irish accent and to hear the man acclaimed as a great discovery."

We both listened to a broadcast on *Bernard Shaw* and he

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contradicted almost everything the distinguished broadcaster said, interrupting with 'rubbish', 'nonsense'. He obviously enjoyed it and forgot that the speaker heard nothing of his continuous commentary.

G.B.S. said: "It was a much prettier picture of me than I really am. It wasn't a bad obituary rehearsal."

To change the subject, I asked G.B.S. why he didn't write a book on Mozart.

"I never knock at an open door. As you know, I walk right in," he answered. "When they stop writing and talking about me, then I'll know that I have come into my own."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

I VOWED never to get infuriated with him and he must have missed that satisfaction. I knew the look of innocence which presaged mischief.

"I had a visitor this afternoon, a man after your own heart. I thought of asking you to come in only, as you know, I make a point of never mixing my friends."

"Why after my own heart?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know. He had the same innocent approach to things. You seem to see things as for the first time while I see them as for the last time, that is when I see them at all."

"What do you suggest is the correct attitude to adopt?" I asked.

"That's the kind of poser *he* put to me. I told him that we must always do things as if we are going to live for ever, and then we will. There are so many things I might have done years ago and which I now would have enjoyed but I took for granted that I was going to die the following day."

"Are you sorry that you have written too much?" I asked.

"You mean that if I had the right attitude I might have taken five years over a play and ten years over a book. I don't think so. It may well be that only two or three of my plays will survive the crucible of time but I could not have written the two unless I had written all the others and I could not have written the others unless I had addressed street corner meetings and envelopes. Anyhow, the person who writes slowly and with great deliberation does not necessarily write better than one who writes in great heat. When I read my work I can recognize the inspired moments: they are on a different level of consciousness, the supreme level, but they can no more stand on their own than a nose or a beard can stand on its own."

I was hoping he would tell me more about the nature of inspiration but instead he informed me that he hated the thought

of becoming the typical old man with the features, fads and fancies of an old man. He said:

"An old man contains within himself every stage of human development and should be able to switch on any period at will. I can be as solemn as the youngest and as irresponsible as the oldest. I'd hate to think that I am the same thing to all people."

"On the contrary, I never know which of you my friends are going to meet. I haven't sufficient labels for every aspect of you."

"I've had an entirely new experience today. A visitor came with a message from Charlotte."

I think G.B.S. expected me to laugh and he was obviously disappointed at my lack of humour.

"I told this visitor that I wasn't in the least interested, and you should have seen his face. He, however, insisted and I had to listen to a string of commonplaces, making me feel that a person like myself was very much needed on the other side."

"The dead seem to have very little to tell us," I said.

"They feel called upon to guard us against our wisdom. If they had their way we'd never do a thing without consulting them. I, personally, as you know, like getting advice from all and sundry and then doing just what I intended doing. I don't think I've ever been deflected from my course by advice. I'm worse than a politician in that respect. No politician has ever listened to my advice."

"They enjoy doing the opposite," I suggested.

"That is why I always feel tempted to say the opposite of what I think. It's a bad habit I've got into. When I die, nothing will induce me to return, even if I am remembered. There is not a soul alive worthy of a dead man's care."

"I think I have come across many souls worthy of care. You have met at least half a dozen at my place," I said.

"I don't think that they will want me to visit them when I am a heap of maggots, super maggots . . . in my case. I remember once settling comfortably on an ant-hill and having to divest myself of trousers in front of a Fabian Summer School. They didn't think much of my sense of humour. When Beatrice walked into a wasp nest she had the presence of mind to throw off all her clothes, drink a bottle of whisky and leave the rest to

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nature. When she got up at last, she was all right. I suppose you contend, Inca, that these ants and wasps are the materialized dead."

"I am not contending anything," I said.

"Then what made you bring up the question of spiritualism? You don't know what consciousness is and I don't know. It is extraordinary how most people prefer to dwell on the periphery of the mind where no two people mean the same thing when they use the same language and nobody knows what he is talking about. Let's get back to the centre of things, the good solid centre: survival depends on how we can order the *physical* basis of life. I see myself as a busker entertaining the huge queues for the slaughter house."

I don't know how it happened but within a moment we were talking about Oxford. I think it was because the spiritualist fellow had come from that city.

"Aren't you sorry, G.B.S., that you hadn't the benefit of an Oxford training?" I asked impishly.

"Two of my friends had such a training and came to a bad end: Oscar Wilde finished up with a routine job at Reading and Algernon Swinburne finished up as a bored resident in respectable Putney."

I reminded him of William Morris.

"They learnt more from Morris than he could learn from them. Wallpapers and tapestries were not on the examination list. How many dons could knit their own socks? All the same, as with Granville-Barker, there is a strong academic strain in me. I have always loved lecturing to learned societies, to unemployables as well as dockers. It is as well that I kept the stream of creative life flowing instead of getting it blocked up while travelling underground through the universities. By avoiding education, I can claim to be the best educated person in the world, or at least in the first hundred."

"I notice," I said, "that you are at your best with well-educated people."

"And I suppose you have also noticed that only people who can read buy my books. A very remarkable phenomenon! The fact of the matter is that educated people are easily gulled. I have

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a habit of talking to the expert about his own subject and in that way helping him to clarify his mind. A blind man knows the way better than the ordinary person because he has to know every pillar and post but he is glad of a little assistance all the same. The only people I find it impossible to help are those who don't know that they are blind. I sometimes think that I must be the only person who sees."

"And you have survived!"

"I often wonder how I did it. Perhaps I am only pretending to be alive like everybody else."

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

TWO willows stood in our garden, sheltering willows under which in the hot blistering days we would sit and work. G.B.S. would often find us there and sit with us.

"I'd like two such willows in my garden. Charlotte seems to have overlooked the planting of willows in her Garden of Eden."

"They will take ten years at least to reach any dimensions."

"Good, then I will have something to look forward to," G.B.S. replied.

When the willows arrived G.B.S. must have had the same sensation as the swan seeing cygnets after sitting for months on the eggs. The look of amazed wonder amused us. It was on a wet melancholy day when we planted them in his garden but G.B.S. defied the rain as he held the tender tree-lings. He thought the planting of trees the most satisfying of all activities.

"I'm sorry Charlotte was not here to receive the infants," he said. "She loved green things."

It was true indeed that Charlotte was not there. Her name was never mentioned in the village and her presence was never felt in the house. I always thought that the most tragic of all humans must be the one who hooks herself to a celebrity and refuses to realize that he has human frailties. He was always the 'great man' to her and her happiness was derived only from his success. What would have happened if he had proved a failure? As she lived only in him, her going was like the clearing of a creeper from a wall: it laid bare his soul. I found no satisfaction in being the 'neighbour' of a great man and winced every time I was introduced as such. I fought hard against the growing identification with him: I loved hot sunny weather but whenever the day was sultry, I was unhappy because I knew G.B.S. could not stand such weather; I saw things with his eyes and felt things as *he* felt them. It had come upon me imperceptibly but I suddenly grew conscious of my growing loss of identity and was appalled. The only thing to do was to fly from the village which held our

dreams. And yet how could we do such a brazen, callous thing?

He read our thoughts and said nothing. What could he do about it? If only we had not fitted so easily and happily together. There were occasions when he proved so disagreeable that we welcomed the resultant separation, but it did not last. When affection waned, pity surged up; when pity went there was always the bond of intellect. No third party could ever understand the firm and delicate relationship as taut and sensitive as a violin string. It was not necessary for him to take out his box of tricks with us: he could be as silent as he wished and talk as much as he did. Perhaps in the ultimate analysis it was physical: he could eat and walk with us and that meant a great deal.

After the planting of the willows, all trees seemed to become alive to G.B.S. At all our walks he asked for the names of different trees and made remarks about each, mostly disparaging. He especially disliked their notion of time: every year an extra ring. He knew a lady who was like that. And he assured us that no tree lived beyond a hundred years. When we showed him trees that did, he was quite hurt.

We told him that John Galsworthy had once bought up a whole wood to prevent its being destroyed; he thought it was stretching the idea of consciousness too far.

"As I told Virginia Woolf, the last of Pater's disciples, there is such a thing as being super-sensitive. It is a subtle form of superiority and I loathe superiority. My mother always maintained that flowers had feelings and she disliked Beatrice Webb because she would crush a flower as she talked. When I tell people that I am a vegetarian, I am always told that cabbages also have feelings. I myself have always abstained from circuses but still switch on when there is a broadcast of a fight. I am probably more sensitive to the feelings of horses than of men. I suppose as one grows older, one narrows down the objects of sensitivity until finally there is one object left, the pitiable self."

"And yet you have always maintained that the plea of the humanitarian is a plea for widening the range of fellow feeling?"

"My plea has been nothing of the kind. It has always been that the human being is debased by inhuman practices. My plea has never been a sentimental regard for the animal although I



## *Shaw's Corner*

personally have always envied the animal not having to talk. Would you not much rather see me wagging my tail when you come than go off the deep end about human affairs?"

"I always think that it is a pity that humans haven't a more demonstrative way of showing satisfaction," I said.

"I find them far too demonstrative. I remember once addressing a meeting with Will Crooks. He whispered as he stood up to address the five thousand people: 'I'll have them all crying in five minutes, you'll see.' He did. When I got up I had them all laughing in two minutes. And what was the result? As soon as they got back they quarrelled with their neighbours. Now if only we could have got this huge audience to sit silently, something inspiring might have happened. Give me the splendid silent tree."

"There are some people I could listen to for hours," I said.

"Oscar Wilde, H. G. Wells, G. K. Chesterton. . . . Will there ever be such talkers again? A new kind of conversationalist has been created by the wireless: a man who can talk intimately to millions but the conversation is one-sided. I'd like to answer Priestley when he is most persuasive, I'd like to talk with Max Beerbohm but I have to sit still as if bewitched. I become aware of the silence of the room and fall in love with it and am soon asleep in her arms."

I thought that it was a pity that Wells and Chesterton were indifferent broadcasters.

"The wireless cannot create the necessary atmosphere of emotional excitation: they were like eager schoolboys before a tuck shop: ideas were doughnuts to them, they couldn't eat fast enough. And yet when they were together they found it difficult to make conversation."

He told me that he was much more at home before a microphone than before an audience because laughing always put him out as it happened invariably at the wrong point.

"People always think I am joking when I talk about myself and laugh at my audacity. But everything I know has come from the study of myself. I have to keep myself company so why shouldn't I make the best of a bad job and get interested in my-

self? I mean my conscious self, the unconscious bores me. When the dear old Freudians put down my excessive self-posturing to my suppressed sex life, I counter them with the self-knowledge that much of the crude excessive sex life is due to suppressed mental life. I posture not because I am a male but because I am a spire reaching out to God. It is my form of worship."

"Self-worship?"

"Call it that, if you like. I don't mind in the least. In the world of science, sport and society, I have always been a complete outsider, but in the world of myself, I have always been the only insider. I have respected myself sufficiently not to be imposed upon by teacher, priest, doctor or politician. I have held myself to myself. . . ."

Every day G.B.S. went to see the willows to mark how they were progressing and accepted with fortitude their lack of growth.

"It is interesting to note how when one gets interested in a new thing, one discovers a lot of accumulated tags of knowledge, picked up perhaps in childhood, cursory reading and conversation. Thinking is mainly elimination. My books have always been a glorious clearance sale of cast-offs."

He was certainly catching up in his knowledge of trees. I told him that one of his numerous biographers was now engaged on a book about trees.

"He should have written about me after his study of trees, not before," G.B.S. answered. "Or would a study of onions be more helpful to the understanding of my simple personality? You cannot tackle an onion without tears coming to your eyes. Talking about naturalists, I had a visit from one today and I asked him why God who said: 'Let there be Light' and there was light, left a ragged edge and called it twilight."

Twilight was always the dangerous hour for him.

"What was his answer?" I asked.

"Oh, like all scientists he knew nothing. I told him that God was like a mother. The mother would like her child to be a Shaw, but if he turns out to be a mongol she guards him as if he were even more precious. That's how God regards the twilight, judging by the way poets write about it. They now see through





*Discussing his last play with  
Producer, Scenic Designer and  
leading members of the cast*



*To his hut with his MS.*

spring, soon they will see through twilight, I can't see anything in it."

Not only did he not see anything in the twilight but he didn't hear, either. I once saw a car turn the corner at a terrific speed and G.B.S., unheeding, walk in front of it as if it were not there. If it were not for the presence of mind of the driver and the fact that it was an amazingly responsive machine, there would have been an accident. The car in avoiding him made a fearful noise, mounted a bank and almost overturned. The noise brought me rushing out of my house and I found the driver gently leading G.B.S. back to his house. I spoke to the driver afterwards.

"He asked me if I thought there was going to be a war with Russia. Some people don't know when they've been killed. It makes me believe in an after-life."

The driver was rushing as rapidly in his reasoning as in his driving. He continued:

"When I told the old man that I took it for granted, he said that everything the world has taken for granted has been disproved. And then he told me that he once asked a man who lived on the edge of an active volcano why he didn't find a safer place to live in. 'Oh,' said the man, 'the inevitable never happens.'"

And the driver added: "The old man was as near to the inevitable as a mouse in the mouth of a cat."

I saw that the driver was not aware whom he had almost killed. He could not see the large letters on the gate proclaiming who lived in the house and the beard might have belonged to any very old man.

"I'm surprised that they let him go out alone," he said as he drove off. "I'll give this place a miss in future. Once lucky, second time fatal."

When later on in the day I informed G.B.S. that he had escaped death by the skin of his teeth, he replied that he didn't know that his dentures had an epidermis.

"A man I met outside my house today told me he thought a war with Russia inevitable. We must stop that kind of talk. Man is the only animal that insists on building his own traps. When one is ready he suddenly develops a taste for cheese and walks right into it. If people took the least heed of what I said,

I'd shout until I died of shouting. I know they would only say that I shouted because I enjoyed it, in the same way as they say that I write plays because I enjoy it."

"The Russians are not helping," I said. "They have a stranger notion of our life than we have of theirs."

"They couldn't have a stranger notion of our life than we have of ours. I've made a fortune from telling the English how they live. Instead of giving themselves the credit for being funny they attribute my success to my sense of humour. I can't see things in the twilight but they walk about as in a dream in the broad daylight and have to be shown what they are like in the theatre. That's how I took to the writing of plays. I could only get them to take me seriously when I pretended to be joking."

"You couldn't live in a country where there was no freedom of speech," I said.

"Have you considered this, Inca? In this country, where according to Tennyson any man can say what he likes, no one ever says anything: it is the silentest country in the world; while in Russia they talk to the early hours of next morning. When I returned from Russia I felt enveloped by a depressive silence, even though I was with Lady Astor."

"It is a pity that the Russians haven't a Bernard Shaw to reveal them to themselves."

"I was invited to become a Russian citizen but it would have meant starting all over again. I'm a very bad starter as you know. I have never known how to start or how to end: I'm all middle, like Will Dyson's capitalist."

That the leanest of all people should compare himself to the fat man who represented the capitalist class in the early days of *The Daily Herald* was indeed funny.

The thing that made G.B.S. extremely happy was the co-operative effort of Clare and himself in an *édition de luxe* of *Buoyant Billions*. The illustrations by Clare were to consist of full-page imaginative studies of the faces of all the characters in the play. Day by day G.B.S. examined the drawings, and they discussed the features of priest, solicitor, world-betterer and mathematician; there was complete understanding between

## Shaw's Corner

writer and artist. More than once G.B.S. changed the description of a character because the drawing was more authentic.

"Even if the play flops completely, it has given me a most exciting time," G.B.S. said as he took the drawings away with him to live with the characters. He sat by the fire and forgot wireless and sleep as he lovingly fingered each face. Scores of drawings were done, many mislaid by G.B.S., and it was very difficult to choose between them. "I was asked by a friend who saw the drawings whether they were done from life," G.B.S. exclaimed.

"And what did you say?"

"From real life, the life in a book, not the shadowy life of house, street and market place. There has never been a book like it."

Then came all the fun of selecting the paper and the type. No expense would be spared. He was going all out this time. He grew more and more anxious that the book would not be out till after his death because he felt that his death was very near.

"There are certain intimations which you will not understand," he pointed out. "Don't worry, I thoroughly enjoy dying."

Estimates and more estimates kept him busy. Every *édition de luxe* he could lay his hands on had to be examined and improved upon.

"We must throw economy to the winds. The only moments I have never regretted are those when I damned fate. I have been far too cautious all my life," G.B.S. exclaimed as he saw the figures mounting. It was obvious that artist and author would get very little out of it except the pleasure of a great creative effort.

The book was also to be celebrated in verse. His mornings were given over to discovering a rhyme for 'buoyant' and he did not find it as simple as he thought. The word 'foudroyant' intrigued him and he had to construct a line ending in that word. He showed it to me nervously and asked me to improve it. It read:

"Only in dream my prime returns. . . .  
And my dear friends forsake their urns"

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I hoped he would reveal to the world the dreaming of an old man. We know so little about it because men of ninety cease to be articulate. But the rhyming got in his way.

Clare's answer in verse made him very happy.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

I THOUGHT it was rather late for him to start on a new subject but he saw no reason why in ten years or so he could not catch up with the latest thought in mathematics. The moral fervour was there and he had already found vent for it in a long speech in *Buoyant Billions*. He plundered our shelves for every book on mathematics and now whenever I came to Shaw's Corner, I found him in his study leaning studiously over a heavy book, smiling and strangely contented.

The study, which was so generously furnished for concentrated work, was only just discovered by him. Up to now he had used the shelter down in the garden, for it was a principle with him that a man ought to be as far away from the house as possible while the house work was being done. Though he would not admit it, the strain of going across the lawns was getting too great for him especially when there were so many heavy books to carry to and fro.

G.B.S. explained that he had always been interested in mathematics and that it was left to him to put Newton on the map. He showed letters he had received from Jeans and Eddington and he thought that it showed understanding on my part to get Lord Keynes to write on "G.B.S. and Isaac Newton".<sup>1</sup>

"I knew that Keynes was interested in figures but I was unaware of his interest in Newton. If I had known I would never have made those awful mistakes which he points out. I was sorry to learn from him that Newton hadn't a housekeeper and maid at Cambridge. I took for granted that no person engaged on thinking could do without a housekeeper and maid."

I think he must have read the article by Keynes for the first time for he frowned when he discovered that he was wrong when he made Newton in his play say:

<sup>1</sup>In *G.B.S.* 90

## Shaw's Corner

"I spend my life contemplating the ocean of my ignorance. I once boasted of having picked up a pebble on the endless beach of that ocean. I should have said a grain of sand."

What Newton actually said was:

"I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy, playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay undiscovered before me."

G.B.S. pondered on his error and said: "I got my best rhetorical effects in *Saint Joan* by quoting her verbatim but I missed my chance in *Good King Charles' Golden Days* by having to make up Newton's speech."

He continued reading and suddenly beamed with happiness:

"I didn't know that Voltaire had met Newton. I knew that Swift had met him often and made fun of him but not Voltaire. I wonder how Newton would have liked my plays? He would have regarded my new-found interest in mathematics as a waste of priceless time. And yet to me, mathematics is the greatest of all passions and holds within itself the key to the universe. I've obviously been on the wrong scent all my life. It's never too late to commence."

I thought for a short while that this new-found enthusiasm would shut out his interest in the phonetic alphabet but he could carry on six things at a time and find a unity in them. Even while he was talking to me about Florence Farr, who I thought had little to do with mathematics, he informed me with pride that her father was the great Mr. William Farr, the statistical adviser to Florence Nightingale. All roads led to mathematics.

Whenever a young man asked G.B.S. for advice as to promising careers, there was always one suggestion and one only: "Take up statistics if you have brains; if you haven't you may well consider the stage or politics."

He thought that the worlds of literature and drama were completely exhausted and it would do no harm if we permitted these fields to lie fallow for a century or so.

Once or twice I sat with him in the study at his request and

I looked at his shelves while he concentrated on his book. Suddenly he would look up and read aloud and dismiss the whole work as utter nonsense.

"The fact is," G.B.S. declared with authority, "no mathematician has come along with a sense of humour."

"Michelangelo and Beethoven had no sense of humour," I pointed out.

"No great work can be done without it. They knew that there was not a soul in the world who could share their fun and so they remained glum. I see a subtle humour running right through their work. It takes many generations before the humour of a genius is appreciated. If a man discovers that his humour is appreciated in his own life-time then he may conclude that he is not a genius, but a comedian."

He started on another book and quickly turned it down because it tried to define terms.

"When they start with definitions I know that the book has nothing to give me. There is something so ladylike and respectable about a definition and I can't stand 'ladies'. I've never learnt anything from a 'lady'. I hate them."

The next book held his attention and conversation stopped dead. Then he looked up and said: "It's strange that I can go on reading page after page without understanding and yet feel all the time that I am getting something from it. I am holding on to this book."

He glanced at the title: *A Mathematician's Apology* by G. H. Hardy.

"This man exaggerates like a scientist and is as exact as a poet, he is a man after my own heart," he added.

Mathematics brought him back to Florence Farr and Florence Farr to W. B. Yeats.

"Yeats was such a handsome man that I knew I hadn't an earthly once he stepped on the scene. I left Florence to his tender mercy and within a short time she was keening his stuff like an idiot-banshee. As I told her, cats do the same thing when they are serenading one another but the genuineness of their emotion gives them poignancy. There was nothing genuine about the cantilations of Yeats. I made him 'strip and go naked' when he

### *Shaw's Corner*

talked to me. He knew that the symbolic esoterics didn't work with me."

He went to his shelves and searched long for a volume of Yeats and read aloud:

'I made my song a coat  
Covered with embroideries  
Out of old mythologies  
From heel to throat;  
But the fools caught it,  
Wore it in the world's eyes  
As though they'd wrought it.  
Song, let them take it,  
For there's more enterprise  
In walking naked.'

"I discovered the fun of walking naked as soon as I arrived in England. Yeats remained Irish to the end. Even Ezra Pound failed to strip him of his embroideries. Have you noticed what a remarkable influence bad poets have always had on good poets, Ezra Pound on T. S. Eliot, Milton on Blake and Coleridge on Wilde? Even I have derived a lot from Molière."

G.B.S. had never forgiven Bridie for comparing him unfavourably with Molière and brought it in whenever he could.

"I noticed you didn't change your voice or cantilate when you read Yeats," I remarked.

"Of course not. I enjoy reading poetry because it is the only time when I can be natural. No blue curtains and candles for me. Man must accept his 'voices' as easily and as naturally as he accepts his vices. Abstinence from vice can be as devilish as abstinence from the 'inner voice'. You remember what my good friend General Booth replied when he was asked by a fawning waiter whether he liked white wine or red?

"'Wine, take it to the Devil,' Booth shouted.

"'Pardon me, sir,' the waiter replied, 'I don't know the way. I am open to your guidance.'"

Again G.B.S. told me that he owed it to General Booth that a religious theme ran through his plays. "It might have been

dry-as-dust comedy but for the fact that I offered to write a play for the General to be performed at their Festivals. He advised me to take it to the Devil, to where it belongs. Unlike the waiter I hadn't a ready reply except to prove that the Devil was the source of my religious inspiration. I wonder if the Salvationists like my Major Barbara as much as the Catholics like my St. Joan? I understand that the poets are all writing plays to be performed in cathedrals; I'm very glad of it because the church is the beginning and end of all drama. My advice to poets is not to take the easy course and write their stuff in verse to be cantilated but to write in plain undiluted prose like the Bible and Bunyan. No so easy, I admit."

"And yet, G.B.S., you say elsewhere that the time is ripe for the Baroque and that is what you have in common with Clare?"

"Don't forget that Clare and I have served our apprenticeship at saying just what we see and think and now in the *édition de luxe* of *Buoyant Billions* we can let go. All the others are still lisping in numbers. The wars have knocked the bottom out of their thinking and they are left on their knees cantilating. It will be a healthy sign when they start talking prose. It was Jourdain who discovered he was talking prose; *il faut cultiver nos jardins*."

G.B.S. laughed heartily at his own joke as if it were somebody else who uttered it and he laughed with his whole being. He needed a few such jokes to warm him up for the evening. He was always his best audience and was the first to laugh.

His face turned grimly grave.

"I'm convinced the government wishes to destroy us," he said ominously. "By their generous supply of cheese they've turned every vegetarian's home into a gas-chamber. It's only because I've been hardened to any diet by years of lentil cutlets and baked beans that I've survived my present ordeal. What do you do with the cheese?" G.B.S. asked.

"The birds seem to like it."

"Yes, and then they come and make a mess on St. Joan. It won't do. A Member of Parliament called the other day and I mentioned it to him. Do you know what he said? 'The other cheese is off the ration.' As if I can afford things off the ration!

The government works on the assumption that what is good enough for the labourer is good enough for me. This is Heartburn House."

"What is your alternative?" I asked.

"If I suggested it to the Ministry of Food they'd laugh and do the opposite. All people have got it into their heads that I always say the opposite of what I mean. I suggest that vegetarians should be granted double the usual meat ration so that meat eaters had less meat to go round. As things are at present we vegetarians encourage meat-eating."

"And what on earth would we do with the meat?"

"Vegetarians are lovers of animals and have nothing to feed them with. Why should our pets be encouraged in petty theft? Why must they sneak into a neighbour's back garden and steal the patient sausage or the much-prized chop? We vegetarians will never be able to look our animals in the eye until we achieve the dignity of a special meat ration. The only taste of meat my cat ever gets is when it licks my bony hand. I know of vegetarians who have to slink into disgusting fish shops to feed their cat: a whole ocean kept nicely salted just to create food for the cat. So uneconomical!"

I suggested that if he put the case to Herbert Morrison, who had been a vegetarian, he would be moved to do something.

"I must draw up a memorandum. I understand that most people feel so much better with less meat to eat that instead of squatting in stuffy theatres and listening to my inane jokes, they go for walks and some even have begun to think for themselves."

Again G.B.S. settled down to *A Mathematician's Apology* and frowned when he read that the author's plea was that it was useless.

"I must stop this kind of rot. The great men are always convinced that their work is of no use and the little men come along and turn this knowledge to the disadvantage of the human race. Newton led the way to all the horrors of modern science, all because he thought his mathematical work of no importance."

"You talk of great men, G.B.S. Have you come across any great people?"

"Well, greatness is very much in the eye of the beholder.

## *Shaw's Corner*

Charlotte used to find greatness in the most insignificant of people. Look at the kind of people the different coteries worship! Some of them find their way to this house and really I find them so wearisome that after a little tittle-tattle about the weather and the shocking state of the universe, I show them the door. I can only conclude that I haven't an eye for true greatness. Do you think I am a great person?"

"In some respects, yes."

"I've done some good work but that doesn't make me great. In the perspective of time, what appears good now may appear utterly commonplace. I've always been modest about my achievements, as you know. Forget my public announcements, we're talking as man to man. In what respects?"

But he did not wait for an answer.

"I want to tell you, Inca, something that has been on my mind. Clare and you are extremely able people, especially Clare. I know that it is in my power to give you both the opportunity you both need but I'm going to let you down. You'll think me a cad but I don't mind. You must take human nature as you find it. I enjoy my perfidy."

"I don't know what you mean," I said unconvincingly. "You have no obligations to us."

"Yes, I have. It is because I have that I am going to let you down deliberately and shamelessly."

I don't know what he expected me to do, but it brought no dramatic gesture from me.

"We're going to London tomorrow," I said. "Is there anything you'd like us to get?"

"Must you go to London? It helps me terrifically to know that you are both near. I have nobody to talk to."

"It's a long-standing appointment."

"Damn appointments."

"It's with my publisher."

"Make the publisher come to you and I'll be there to see that you're well served. I mean to take you in hand. You have no eye for business."

"I'm afraid there are other matters in London which demand our attention. Clare has to show some paintings."

### *Shaw's Corner*

"Which? Tell me the gallery and I'll write cracking her up to the skies."

"You've already cracked me up to the skies. Another crack would bring the house down."

"Then you are a heartless fellow. When you return you'll probably find me dead. You're not descending to petty revenge, are you?"

"They are long-standing appointments."

"When I want to get away from people, I tell them that I have letters to write; when you want to get away from me, you discover that you have long-standing appointments. It will do you good to get away from me occasionally. How you have stood me so long, I don't know."

We returned from London particularly early and he wanted to know all about it. Whom did we meet, what did we see and did we buy any new books? There were a hundred questions we had to answer as if we had just returned from distant lands. Our life was an open book to him and he liked to think that he skipped nothing.

"I had a visitor, so it wasn't too bad. As usual she brought down somebody with her to see the animal and I had to take out my box of tricks. I was in great form. When I said to the man: 'I can see you're naval,' it brought the house down. I like her because she brings out the worst in me, or to put it mathematically: she is to me as I am to you."

"You are certainly progressing in your studies," I said.

"Like a haystack on fire," G.B.S. laughed. "An equation is a statement of the equality of two things: G.B.S. minus his laughter equals. . . ."

He paused as if it had not been premeditated and then added:

" 'Macbeth without his Lady  
A poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. . . . '

"How the world will go on without my running commentary, I don't know."



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It seemed to me that he was drunk with flattery.

We told him that we had been to see Alma Tadema's studio with its gorgeously tiled ante-room and spacious domed ballroom in which he painted.

"Artists in those days were wonderful business men, however much they despised the bourgeoisie. They knew that the new-rich enjoyed being despised. Who occupies the studios nowadays?"

"This particular studio was tumbling down."

"A film magnate will get hold of it," G.B.S. said. "This Alma Tadema was a foreigner, like myself, and therefore no judge of English character. He would think any suburban girl he saw in the street a society beauty and take her home and paint her. Women only become beautiful when they are passionately interested in things. When I went to the theatre to see my plays I always watched the faces of the women in the audience: if they grew more beautiful as the play proceeded I knew that the play was good. No woman has ever become beautiful by cultivating beauty for its own sake. All the most beautiful women have naturally gravitated towards me and I have become a pretty good judge. The older one gets, the wider the field of choice, because the older women are brought in and they are the loveliest of all."

Fearing that I might misinterpret his remarks he added quickly: "Women have never played an important part in my life. I could always discard them more easily than my friends. I was always more interested in the things I could mould and no man has ever succeeded in influencing any woman. I have seen fine men reduced to insipidity and incapacity by women."

"And I have seen men bloom into gifted personalities under the influence of women," I said.

"Some people prosper in adversity," G.B.S. replied. "People are always asking me whether they should marry, as if weighing the pros and cons has ever influenced a soul. By the way, I made an awful mistake the other day. A theatre manager asked permission to put on *Major Barbara* for its S.A. I gave him my blessing and told him that it has always been my secret hope that the Salvation Army would accept me as its own playwright. I heard this afternoon that S.A. stood for something different,

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something which I thought missing in my plays. I am lost, entirely lost." Then after a reflective pause: "Or am I found out? Are they beginning to see the unconscious in what I set out consciously to do?"

His interest in mathematics evaporated. The books were returned and his consoling thought was that all conceited people should take up a pursuit for which they have no aptitude. "That's why so many take to politics and literature and I took to the writing of plays when I was young. I was cut out for a cashier in a bank, nothing amuses more than counting up my gains. Tin tacks, tin tacks. . . . Mathematics sets me dreaming and I have fought against dreaming all my life."

## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

HE attended a near-by hospital for a violent attack of fibrositis and every day when he arrived, the doors of the different wards were flung open that the patients might see him passing. He loathed illness and tried hard to keep up with his usual activities as if the illness did not exist.

"I've never been a Christian and I've given science many a hard knock, and so I have no room for a compound of both, but I'm willing to try anything as long as it is frowned on by the medical profession. I suggested to the hospital that they should have a Roll of Honour giving the names of all the important people who died there. But it hasn't sunk in yet."

"The doctors do not claim to be omniscient," I suggested.

"They go to the nature-cure people when they're ill. The only people who have helped me have all been artists. But for Clare I would have been a helpless invalid."

He showed me a colourless little pill.

"I found this in Charlotte's room, to be taken when life grew too wretched for her. I have it now and will not hesitate to take it rather than become a burden."

"That's a long way off," I said, dismissing the subject.

"It's here and now. There's nothing else for me to do. A new burden has been added to dying: I dread to think of the biographers waiting for me to go."

He begged of me not to publish anything until at least a year after his death.

"You're not afraid of what I may say, are you?" I asked.

"I'm afraid you may not have the courage to tell the truth," he answered with a lively twinkle. "Anyhow, I won't be there to attack you again. There wasn't anything to attack but you must let me have my bit of fun sometimes. As there is no one to take my place I'll have to go on after my death. So beware."

"You're not going to die for many a year, so why worry?"

"I enjoy worrying. It's the one thing left to me. Death is only

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like going into the study but there is no returning. I'll probably find a way. Where there's a Shaw there's a way."

Every morning he went to the hospital for his violet-ray treatment and he complained that if he got into the habit of doing it he wouldn't know what to do with himself when it was no longer necessary to go to the hospital.

"Once I can rid myself of the obsession that I must do at least two hours writing every day, going to hospital is as good a way of spending one's time as any other. I at least see some new faces ready-made instead of having to create them. The difference between God and myself is that He can create the dullest people and they worship Him for it, but I may only create exciting characters."

"You're not obliged to go on writing," I said.

"Nor was Gandhi obliged to go on spinning, but he did. If I can't create exciting characters I must be content with dull ones. The danger is that I may become as dull as my creations. I don't know why I go so eagerly to the hospital when I don't want to get well. Perhaps that's why. I've been dipping into the Bible again. It's an extraordinary thing that the books of my boyhood have retained their interest for over eighty years. I have been as fortunate in my authors as in my friends. Will you say that of me? Have I been a beneficent or a malevolent interest in your life?"

"I haven't added up yet. I'm very bad at accountancy."

"Well, even a malevolent influence can be productive of good things. You'll probably hate me as the others did but you'll be glad that you knew me all the same. I'll never forget when I first stepped into your place and I had to decide whether I would squeeze you out or take you in. I haven't decided yet. I didn't want anybody in the village who had heard of me."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what? Damn your politeness. You know perfectly well how I felt towards you both. Ayot became homely."

"You always regarded home as a prison. At least, you said so."

"You're not going to quote my works against me. Can't you take a compliment? I've always been a home bird. Charlotte



*Village Meeting  
on the occasion of the presentation  
of the gate, and below a close-up*



*Clare Winsten at work*

*Theatre design for "Buoyant Billions" by Theodora Winsten*



could always rely on me. You know that perfectly well. Because I said that home was the girl's prison and the woman's work-house, every female fell for me but they misunderstood me. I had no desire to set up home with any of them, not I."

"We've been extremely happy in Ayot St. Lawrence."

"Been? You're going to be here for ever."

He recovered and put the recovery down to everything but the medical attention. For weeks the thought of death haunted him. When we walked through Lamor Park and saw the hollow trees, he compared himself with them.

"There's only one per cent of me left and that's going fast. The most fertile mind the world has ever known and that gone to the blazes."

And then he smiled as he added: "I've given it every opportunity. I've led a frugal industrious life worthy of my great talent. I shielded it from the corruption of flattery and vanity."

He lifted the question mark of a body to its full height and apologized for all the harm he had done to us. I did not know what he had in mind at the moment and I did not interrupt his thought.

"You must think me a wicked bounder but there is always a pathological side to greatness. You've hit the pathological side. It is amazing how so much wickedness can inhabit the same body as sensitivity and great-heartedness. I'm quite serious."

He lifted his eyebrows in the George Robey manner and I had to laugh.

"You're a curious fellow, Inca. You laugh when I am most serious and take me seriously when I am frivolous. I never know with you whether I am standing on my head or on my feet. Or am I just lying?"

The pun was followed by a burst of boyish laughter and I threw over my contrapuntal attitude and laughed with him. He was obviously the younger of the two.

We did not go too far down the avenue because we were both painfully aware of the fact that every step forward involved a step backward or as he explained it: "In life it is impossible to get anybody to go one step forward but with me the difficulty is get back again once I've gone forward. One day I'll go on and never

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want to return. I've been responding to encores for the last sixty years; it's time the curtain went down."

"And where will you go?" I asked.

"Negation. Death makes no difference because Shaw plus o still equals Shaw. It neither takes away nor adds to the original. I've seen a great deal of death lately, as you know: it has released Charlotte, Wells and Webb from wasting bodies and it has cut off Gandhi in his prime and at the height of his power and I think that Gandhi's death was the supreme gesture. When a person has achieved a great work, he should be shot or, better still, painlessly put to sleep. We all know that that is the proper attitude to greatness because we all believe in the Person who died in that way. Jesus must have said, with His profound knowledge of human nature at its best, 'Forgive them, Lord, for they *know* what they do.' I am certain that He did say that."

He stopped, lifted his stick in the air and added: "What would Jesus have thought of me? I'm really a very simple fellow wanting very much what He wanted but I haven't His gift. I enjoyed writing *Androcles and the Lion* more than any other play. Even a child can understand it."

It was a pity that we had to return because the walk was what he needed most of all. There was a chill in the atmosphere but he did not mind it. He wanted to talk.

"Most of us go to our death without having formulated our beliefs or tidied up our minds. If instead of occupying ourselves with our Wills we had instead to write down what we had made of our lives, what a hotchpotch of ineptitudes and muddle-headedness we would reveal. If there is an after-life then we must betray a pitiable condition to the Freuds of the other world. Let us hope that we'll find there what we have missed in this world: pity, mercy and love. I'll have need of them."

We climbed over the stile and he almost fell as he stepped on the rotten wood.

"I'm getting mawkish," he said, holding tightly to my neck.

We reached the lane which led to both our homes.

"We'll go into your place, if you don't mind. I'm happier there. Thank you for the walk."



## *Shaw's Corner*

Clare was painting when we entered.

"I've been boring your husband stiff with my silly thoughts. You've taught him to listen as if he were really interested."

Within a few minutes G.B.S. and Clare were engaged in an exciting and warm-hearted discussion and he forgot about death and fatigue. Art was a rejuvenator and healer.

"Have you ever lost faith in yourself, G.B.S.?"

"Great work has never been done by those who had faith in themselves. A great artist is a guerilla who knows that it would be dangerous for him to be discovered. A guerilla has no faith in himself but he knows that the enemy confident in its stupidity will step into the trap laid for him."

"I do not regard the public as an enemy."

"But the public regards you as an enemy."

"I don't think the public is aware of my existence, G.B.S."

"That's where you have an advantage over me. But I have one advantage over you: my sister advised me when she heard that I was going to become a professional author: 'All you have to do is to grow a beard and look thoughtful.' I followed her advice. Like my sister you dismiss my work as worthless and my life minus my work as empty. I agree with you."

This light-hearted banter continued for quite a while. Suddenly G.B.S. asked to see Clare's large portrait of Gandhi. He sat studying it, then he stood up without effort and walked home in the twilight, the deadly hour for him, taking the rapid paces of those early days and talking as if he had centuries before him.

"I feel like walking on," he said when we reached his gate.

I thought it inadvisable but as he insisted we walked into the darkness, he leaning on my shoulder. This was the first time that we both ventured out in the night, deliberately for a walk.

Our talk took a strange sentimental turn.

"I seem to be running away from Shaw's Corner," he said.

"Not exactly running," I suggested. "Luckily my sight is good in the dark."

"I don't mind where you take me as long as it is as far as

## *Shaw's Corner*

possible from my house. Why isn't it possible to start one's life again?"

"There's not a place in the world where you would not be recognized," I reminded him.

"Old people should be permitted to hide and die. I don't want to be reminded of my past as I don't want to be reminded of my past incarnations. I know I came into this world with a knowledge of this world and I only learnt what I already knew. I must have come prepared to destroy it. The world has gone on with very little change, it is I who have been destroyed. Annie Besant used to talk to me about her previous existences and I laughed at her. Now she is laughing at me, or what is much worse, regarding me with pity. Pray for me, Inca."

What was this new personality he was enacting? I found it difficult to adjust myself to his contemplation in the forbidding darkness. I felt that every step forward was an increasing strain on him and yet I knew that he needed this venture. Gandhi brought up India, India brought up Annie Besant and Annie Besant brought up the thought of incarnation. She was with him, not I.

"You're not afraid of death, are you?" I asked.

"Afraid! I pray for it night and day. The only thing I fear is a long lingering illness. This walk is a preview of death; if I go on in this darkness much longer I'll revert to my natural state. Come, let's return, the chains are calling."

I was certainly very glad to lead him back again.

"The Court was my undoing," he said as we retraced our footsteps. "I became a Court jester. I should never have become a playwright. By temperament I was a statesman: my graduation was from the Vestry to Downing Street but I let myself down by getting too easily to the top of my profession. I should have left high comedy as I left my office stool never to return."

"Neither Webb nor Olivier proved a successful statesman," I reminded him.

"Yes, but I am much more adaptable and docile. I've learnt how to work with others."

Strangely enough, we walked past his house and down the lane without realizing it. It was so dark that I did not notice that

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we had passed my own house until the headlights of an advancing car lit up the hedge.

"Not exactly a kindly light," G.B.S. remarked. "Gandhi could not have been thinking of a car when he sang 'Lead kindly light'. All the same he availed himself of a car when he was in England. Like myself, he was a mass of contradictions."

"I've only just noticed that the sky is full of stars," he exclaimed ecstatically when we reached Shaw's Corner at last.

I think he was going to tell me something, perhaps reveal the naïve belief by which he lived, which, behind the cunning and banter, whispered to him in the lone darkness. But in such things he was as inarticulate as all of us. The safety curtain descended and so the fire which was consuming him did not reach me. Within a few minutes I heard his wireless loud and clear across the narrow lane and by the music I knew that he was dozing in his chair, forgetting that he was old and all his old friends were dead. It was fortunate for him that his dreams were happy dreams. Where was he when he lay so helplessly on his chair, head almost reaching the ground and smiling? Ninety years back, as an urchin envious of the at-homeness of other urchins, or was he receiving the plaudits of a huge audience?

He told me next evening of a letter he received:

"I had a letter the other day from an old flame telling me that I was ever-present in her dreams and that I was always crossing 'the ass's bridge'. I'm not sure whether I came to her in the form of an ass or as an ass-prodder. As a professional interpreter of dreams I explained that the ass stood for the public and the bridge spanned heaven and hell. I asked her in which direction the ass was being led. I await her reply. Do I ever come into your nightmares?"

"I don't think you ever do," I answered.

"Oh, that's a pity. It means that you don't care for me. I don't think a soul really cares for me. The word 'care' is the most wonderful word. To have one who really cares! My mother never cared and Charlotte only cared for me as a genius but never as a human being. They were always telling her what a great man I was and that spoilt our relationship. T.E.L. was the

worst of the lot: he was always reminding her that I was the snow on the mountain peak. Until you both came along I had never known a simple kindly relationship."

"Of course we care for you."

"Then you must stop caring. I've fought against it all my life and I won't have it. I don't care for a soul."

"Why permit the devil to win?" I asked.

"A genius must sell himself to the devil. You do not understand. Have you ever known a genius to be a 'good' man?"

"Goodness is a form of genius," I said.

"I know all that kind of nonsense. A genius must be hard and selfish, must be worshipped and served. He laughs and is terrible."

He burst into the rendering of 'The Faery Song' in Rutland Boughton's *Immortal Hour* and when he finished I stood up and went.

Next day G.B.S. came in earlier than usual and found young students with us, among them a handsome athletic Israeli who was born and bred in Palestine. G.B.S. was filled with awe when he saw this young man and fearing that he might not be recognized, explained that among his friends were Lord Samuel and Einstein.

"I was the chief speaker at the dinner organized by your people in honour of Einstein. My friend Lord Rothschild presided. I attacked science and spoke up for religion."

"Then you were wrong, Mr. Shaw. My country will be saved by science. Without irrigation we would perish."

"And where would your people have been without a common religion?" G.B.S. asked, enjoying the frontal attack.

The young man took the argument in his stride and quietly explained how the young folk in Palestine regard their land.

"We mean to make good economically, that is the thing we are in deadly earnest about."

"The moment you become deadly earnest, you will fail. When Shakespeare wanted us to despise a person, he made him deadly earnest: Shylock, for example. My Jew in *Geneva* is light and witty. A nation of idealists can be dangerous enough but a deadly earnest nation would destroy the world. We've had an example of that recently."

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"Oh, we know how to enjoy ourselves. Ireland was emasculated by its humour but we know when to laugh and when to be serious. You are very popular with my people. So is Shakespeare."

It was difficult for G.B.S. to tear himself away from this young enthusiast who took it upon himself modestly and quietly to lecture the Sage. He invited him to his garden and showed St. Joan, which was the highest tribute he could pay to any person.

## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

**A**S we walked down the lane, we came upon a new erection in the village, a small red structure like a miniature temple large enough for two to pray in, large enough for all the devout people of Ayot St. Lawrence. As nothing ever happened in the village, this was an event of great moment, as important as the installation of electric light in the church. It presaged the passing of the old order and it depressed G.B.S.

"What on earth is this for? A urinal?" he asked.

"You don't know how inconvenient it is for those who haven't a telephone. A person may fall ill. . . ."

"I've often thought of removing my telephone. It's a nuisance to me. I have it because it is convenient for getting groceries and fixing hairdressing appointments, but instead I have to give opinions on every conceivable subject at every inconceivable hour. If a man dies I have to supply an obituary notice even if I have never heard of him; if somebody in Timbuctoo makes a pronouncement on world events, I have to refute his statement without being told what he said. I'm supposed to know everything and everybody. Now any fool can come to this innocent village and call me on the phone."

"But you don't answer the phone."

"There's something imperious about the phone. I always want to answer it and I have to abstain by an effort of will. This frustration does me no good. There are so many things one must do as class symbols. My mother thought I was letting down my class when I stopped eating meat. There is a snobbery value attached to indigestible food, the worse the food the greater the value. I lack the bucolic look, the vitriolic tongue, the patronizing swagger of my class. The others say what they do not think with the utmost pomposity, while I take the utmost trouble to find the truth and say it with the utmost levity."

The church was a convenient half-way house and we entered.

"I sometimes think that God must hate his disciples as much

## *Shaw's Corner*

as I hate Shavians. That is why He makes it so difficult for them. Look at me."

"He hasn't really made it too difficult for you," I said.

"Then you know nothing about me. My life has been a hell, but because I have kept the lid on, nobody has peeped into it."

A Bible stood before him: he opened it and read aloud.

G.B.S. said. "When I was young, we were all interested in the purpose of life but now we think life a damned nuisance. Our art declares it, our poetry declares it. That is why we have become inarticulate; we've lost our bearings."

The sun was blinding when we left the church and walked among patient cows and horses.

"Have you noticed that the cows treat me with amused contempt? That is because I drink their milk. It is the giver's contempt for the givee. I hate giving for that very reason. I am thinking of giving up all animal produce. It may be worse for the animals but much better for ourselves."

As we stood at Shaw's Corner, he said: "We get a deeper understanding of life only when we are too decrepit to do anything about it. I never did care for cynicism: all this disparagement of parents, home and religion never appealed to me. I had to do it to get it out of the system."

"Not out of the social system?" I asked.

"Certainly not. How can any social system be built up without dogma and discipline? I was never a 'free and easy' doctrinaire."

In the evening I found G.B.S. listening to a reading of contemporary poetry.

"I like Walter de la Mare. I am thinking of sending him an encouraging letter urging him to go on with his writing. He sees children with the eyes of an old person and he sees old people with the eyes of a child. I always thought that T. S. Eliot was a very young man: he has the ironic humour associated with innocence."

I told G.B.S. that he guessed wrongly.

"When Woolcott was down to see me some years back, he asked me what I thought of Eliot and thinking he meant Ebenezer the Chartist song writer, I went into rhapsodies about him, later on to find I had made a fool of myself. I did not know anything about Woolcott. If I had known he was a great American wit,

I would have prepared for him. Still, he had a good laugh at my expense. Like myself, he is a gentle unassuming person and we got on very well together when we bemoaned our lot."

The next time we walked down the lane, another surprise awaited G.B.S. The lawn in front of the demolished abbey and used as the village green was beautifully mown and by the low wall was a border of flowers.

"Who's done this?" he asked.

"The village."

"How is it I've not been told of this? I could certainly have given a hand with the mowing. I'm not allowed to help in the garden; if I did my gardeners would probably leave. On a Sunday I do a little pruning on the sly. Anyhow, you can tell them I can supply the finest nettles in the country. I do hope they will not convert this pagan hermitage into something refined and forbidding. Soon they'll start restoring the place and I'll be the only ruin left; I'll now have to find another wild spot where I can feel at home, a place only known to the birds."

I offered to show G.B.S. such a place but he had to return at once because he had to dress for dinner. If he were transported to a savage world, he would expect the cannibals to dress for dinner.

"It would give me more satisfaction to know that I was being consumed by gentlemen."

It is true that the meal prepared for him was not the conventional one nor were the drinks typical of his class, but he sat down to it especially dressed for the occasion as if he were presiding at a banquet. The other meals he regarded as a nuisance but the evening meal was an event. My shock was great when I went in and found him in a black apron, a device to prevent him staining his clothes.

"The uniform of senility," he explained. "I pass through every stage in the course of a day. In the morning I'm young and eager, in the afternoon I'm middle-aged and at night I'm an old, old man. If I had my life over again I'd probably not have the luck. The right people always came along: Lee in Ireland, Salt when I settled in England, the perfect gentleman, the Webbs, Granville-Barker; with such people my success was inevitable. Such people will never come again."



## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

**I**T poured and poured. All the misery of the world came down from the drenched sky. But this did not depress G.B.S. I found him standing in the sodden graveyard of the demolished abbey examining a new grave. He stood fascinated.

In the ruins were two cows who had obviously mistaken the place for a farm and were waiting to be milked. G.B.S. was convinced that they were praying. Another of his friends gone. It is true that he had not seen or corresponded with him for thirty or forty years but he liked to think of him as a friend.

"It should be made a law that for every person who dies a tree must be planted. A wood is the nearest thing to a cathedral. There are not nearly enough trees in the country."

As we came out of the abbey the school taxi drove up and deposited its load of young. We noticed that many had to run the full length of the lane in the pouring rain.

"I'll bring up the point before the next Parish Meeting," I said.

"What, about the dead?"

"No, about the living."

"Do you find that you split up on party lines?" he asked.

"Where does party come in, G.B.S.?"

"Whenever I suggest anything, they unite as one man against me. There are a number of things which need immediate attention. It took years to get a pavement alongside the lane and when it came at last, I noticed that I still walked in the road."

"Habit is habit, as the roadsweeper said."

"Oh no, it's just cussedness," G.B.S. replied. "I hate being bound by rules. I'm not a tramcar."

We walked down the deserted lane and G.B.S. told me that he had learnt a horrible thing about himself, that he snored.

"I remember Charlotte keeping me up all night with her snoring. Once I found courage enough to tell her, 'The noise was so loud, I couldn't hear the cock crow,' I said. She took it very nicely. 'I didn't know you wanted to,' she answered."

It was probably the other way round, I thought.

"I must really do something about it. I don't want it to go round the village. There are enough stories about me already. The latest is that when the household is fast asleep, I creep down on all fours and consume a pound of liver. All because I told a brazen interviewer who asked me if I thought life worth living that it depended on the liver. I thought everyone knew that joke. It went round the inn and out into the world and I am put down as a hypocrite. I confess to plagiarism, I often quote myself, but hypocrisy never, never!"

I told G.B.S. that I had not heard the story.

"Oh, you wouldn't. They think you are in the conspiracy. We come together to hatch plots, as if I've ever gone in for plots. When they see us talking, they conclude we must be talking about them. What else is there to talk about? Politics can be left to the politicians, religion to the clergymen and health to the doctors. I'm just an interfering old man."

"Does it matter?"

"It matters. Every little thing matters. That's what you have to learn. I've always guarded myself against gossip. My respectability is unimpeachable." He paused and then added: "What a sacrifice. I should have shunned respectability like the devil. Well, it's never too late to end."

The rain stopped and the air was fresh with delight.

"Have you ever sat down," G.B.S. asked, "and worked out how another person sees you? I do it quite often. This morning I worked out how I must appear to you. Ultimately I got a very clear picture of myself, and not a very flattering one."

"If you were a portrait painter, all your portraits would be self-portraits, you would always paint yourself as your sitter saw you."

"That at least would be something original. I dislike originality but contemporary painting seems so stale and uninspired, especially the so-called modern work, that any good work must seem miraculously new. I am beginning to think that the human race has lost its capacity for doing good work, the seminal impulse has gone. Do you think I am going mad like Tolstoy and Ruskin?"

## *Shaw's Corner*

I think that his fear was that he was getting too sane.

"I don't think you could go mad even if you tried," I answered.

"You mean I remind you of the too celebrated amateur who being asked could he play the violin, replied that he had no doubt he could if he tried. I've either been insane up to now and am now going sane, or vice versa. By the way, have you been asked to send to the local Leisure Exhibition? They want to know my leisure activities."

As I had helped to organize it, I explained the purpose of the exhibition and hoped that he would assist.

"I'm prepared to sit in the hall for half an hour a day as God's leisure activity. He could not have known what He let Himself in for when He started on me. What sort of things have you got? Any surprises?"

"I don't think we're going to discover any mute inglorious Shaws."

"A contradiction in terms. A Shaw cannot by the nature of things be mute and inglorious. Oscar Wilde told me that he made and embroidered a pair of braces in prison as a work of art, a thing of duty and a toy for ever. He kept them hidden under the mattress for over six months. One day there was a search and an artful warder found the offending handiwork and confiscated it. Oscar howled as if his own child was being murdered. All of us have secret activities which we would hate to reveal. I, for one, read devout literature in the shape of my plays."

He was fidgety and angry and I knew that he had something of consequence to tell me.

"I've heard today of a shocking bit of gossip circulating about me," he said, looking very grim. "I always considered myself superior to gossip but this stuff has taken the stuffing out of me."

"Come, come, G.B.S.," I said. "I've never known you to be worried by that kind of thing. Of all people you have been the least hit by scandal."

"You don't know, Inca. Your soft words are of no use to me. I'm hurt, I'm mortally wounded."

## *Shaw's Corner*

I waited for him to tell me but he kept me in suspense.

"They say that I'm responsible for Oscar's downfall," he suddenly blurted out.

"Not a soul believes it," I said.

"Once a rumour is set going, it's impossible to dislodge it. There is something of the Judas in me, it is true, and I must own to jealousy. . . ."

"Dismiss the whole thing," I pleaded.

"An old man loses his resistance. It was Douglas who started it, it must have been. Why do the people I have helped turn upon me?"

I remained silent.

"My work has been to pull people out of scrapes. Most of my friends found themselves in difficulties sooner or later, because the law is an ass and the ass can be a very violent creature. As you know, I can get on with an ass but most of my friends, however well they get on with me, cannot suffer fools gladly. When I embarked on the thankless task of getting signatures of famous people for the reprieve of some Chicago people who got into trouble, there was only one person who had the courage of his convictions and signed and that was Oscar. If I was jealous it was of his great spirit and not of his success. Success is an accident but greatness is real and permanent. Oscar will be remembered well after I'm forgotten."

"Eighteen-fifty-six was a great year," I said.

"What happened?" he asked, changing his tone.

"The end of the Crimean War," I said, laughing aloud.

"I thought you said 1066. Although I sometimes feel I've lived a thousand years, my memory doesn't go back as far as that."

"I once wrote a poem in honour of Oscar Wilde," I said.

G.B.S. read it aloud to me:

" 'I do not paint, yet on my wall  
Are painted pictures which enthrall:  
I thank all those I cannot see  
Who in my anguish care for me.

### Shaw's Corner

The sun paints in the cube design  
In richest yellow, tender line;  
He piles on colour bright and thick,  
A chequer pattern holds the brick;  
Then suddenly enwrapped in thought  
Rubs off the scheme and leaves me nought;  
But soon again he grows more bold,  
He lavishly pours gold on gold.

The moon prefers symphonic scheme  
Of blue and green in haunting theme;  
The walls too small for her design,  
The floor and ceiling show her line.  
With many brushes at a time  
The moonbeams creep, the moonbeams climb,  
Until my cell is good to me,  
A strange and haunting fantasy.

The gas-jet draws in silhouette  
A thinking figure sorrow-set;  
I thank all those I cannot see  
Who in my anguish care for me.'

"My dear Inca, how wrong you are. I am told that when Oscar was in the hospital ward, or whatever they call it, he kept the other prisoners laughing all the time. Thinking figure sorrow-set be damned!"

"There's not much laughter in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*," I countered.

"I never regarded it as a good poem and *De Profundis* sickened me. He was best when he laughed."

"I'm sorry I worried you with the poem," I said.

"I am jolly glad you let me read it. When will a poet come along who can laugh as I have laughed."

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

THE exhibition was interesting. It told us how the long winter evenings were spent in a village of no cinemas, no dance halls and no theatres, where the people were thrown on their own resources.

G.B.S. had much to say about it.

"Men enjoy doing nothing but women seem to lose their guilt if they are not doing something arduous. The more labour-saving devices they have in the home, the more they find to do."

He examined the photographs and found only one small one of him.

"When I receive a book I at once examine the index to see how many pages are devoted to me. Here they are as tired of my face as I am. I don't blame them: I have to carry it about with me wherever I go and often wish I could leave it in a safe place somewhere."

We stopped before a hand-made rug.

"This is Irish," he said handling it lovingly. "There is already one prosperous Irish industry in Ayot. Add rug making to mug raking and Ayot will be as well known as Popocatpetl."

To G.B.S. everything done by hand was magical.

"I myself am helpless with my hands. I can't repair my shoes and have to ask others to darn my socks. I'm given a clumsy alphabet to work with. And yet even I was once called a craftsman: I once heard a very superior person declare that I was not an artist but a craftsman and he was only interested in my execution. He did his best to do away with me but he went first."

A tapestry took him back to Kelmscott.

"I don't know why Morris hid the most beautiful of all women in the dreariest of all villages. An intellectual can't live in a village even if she has every craft at her finger ends. I can imagine nothing more dreadful than the lot of a genius in an entirely commonplace village where the peasants know him vaguely as a 'writer or something'."

## Shaw's Corner

He said this for all to hear and one or two of the younger people giggled. As we left the hall, one of the visitors asked who we were and his child answered: "The man with the white beard looks just like grandad."

"As a matter of fact, all old men are alike to children as all children are alike to old men. I am just an old man in the same way as a man who cannot see is a blind man. The moment they begin petting and pitying me, I'll know I am unwanted."

A giant lorry with a load of tree trunks passed by and we had to wait.

"It will never manœuvre these narrow lanes," I said.

"What is it?" G.B.S. asked, looking terrified.

"Trees."

"I do not know how it was but I saw William Morris being carried along. My mind is going. My old friends crop up all over the place."

I went with him right into his room while he told me how Beerbohm Tree, seeing the great crowds entering his theatre to see *The Tempest*, remarked to him: "My one regret is that Will is not here to see the admiring throng."

"Thinking Tree was referring to Will Rothenstein, I said: 'Will admires Shakespeare too much to want to see him performed.' I was going to say 'massacred' but I pulled myself up in time. 'Shaw, you have a sense of humour. I never suspected it,' Tree blurted out. Why was I talking of Tree?"

"Obvious, isn't it?"

"Mistrust the obvious, mistrust the simple, mistrust the candid and mistrust the plausible, Inca. When a person declares that he is going to put all his cards on the table, you know he is a card sharper. Now I'll tell you why I thought of Tree. Certainly not because a dead tree passed, but because I have decided not to go to Malvern to see my last play. *Buoyant Billions* will have to do without me. It wouldn't do for the audience of two or three to see me fast asleep."

We discussed different producers.

"I know nothing about anybody. I did not write this play with anybody in mind. I wrote it in vacuum. I am an old man startled at the sound of his voice and yet he must go on talking."

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He went on talking.

"I see my life in seven stages and know each stage by what I had to give up. The first stage was when I gave up the office; the second stage when I gave up bohemianism; the third stage when I gave up the writing of novels; the fourth stage when I gave up the vestry; the fifth stage when I gave up public speaking; the sixth stage when I left my plays to their fate; and the last stage when I give myself to the flames."

Flames were continuously in his mind. He asked me if I knew of a satisfactory fire-escape. All the years he had lived at Shaw's Corner he had never given it a thought but now it had become an urgent problem.

"If my house catches fire, there is no means of escape for the maid who sleeps right upstairs. The fire is a possibility. As you know I fall asleep by a scorching fire and it is a miracle that I haven't caught alight. But you can't depend on miracles to happen when you want them. One day I'll fall right in the fire and the flames will envelope the house. The house won't matter but . . . the maid should have a means of escape."



## *Chapter Thirty*

THE children of the village hung round Shaw's Corner expecting a really great man to arrive, as they had seen a great woman arrive in the shape of Mary Pickford. They were expecting a fleet of American cars and Joe Louis to step out in all his muscular glory. G.B.S. was equally excited, for he also shared their taste for pugilists. He could talk about the early fights he had witnessed and describe in detail the changes in technique. Often in the evening all conversation stopped as he sat intently listening to a broadcast of a fight. I wondered how he would appear among the pea-nut and the orange-peel enthusiasts, he who preached humanitarianism till the pips squeaked.

I asked him about it and he thought his interest in 'fighting' no different from his interest in 'economics'.

"I held on to the Webbs for the same reason that I hold on to Gene Tunney: to plant my feet on solid ground."

And he again told me how in his early days everything conspired to reduce him to fantasy.

"I had to escape into dreaming in order to survive," he said. "I'm an Irishman, you know." And he repeated the Doyle speech word for word.

"'At last you get that you can bear nothing real at all: you'd rather starve than cook a meal, you'd rather go shabby and dirty than set your mind to take care of your clothes and wash yourself; you nag and squabble at home. . . . At last when you come to a country where men take a question seriously and give a serious answer to it, you deride them for having no sense of humour. . . .'

"In boxing one is up against physical facts as in economics one is up against basic facts. Facts, facts, facts alone saved me from my superior worthlessness. I fought against sinking into the

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visionary fashion-ridden theatre and loved the reality of the Vestry and its dustcarts. I recognized myself as a fact and disciplined myself for action. I was always in full training."

He likened himself to a pugilist who could take blows and give blows.

"A pugilist gives up but I go on till my dying day. And I discovered early on that as sensible schemes based on a thorough knowledge of fact are brushed aside as Utopian in England, I had to make my practical ideas appear fantastic enough to be accepted. What is more I had to translate myself into a fantastic figure to get a hearing."

Contact with human nature at its worst did not dishearten him. He did not cry out that human nature was fundamentally evil and treacherous but continued with his propaganda until he saw human nature change before his eyes.

"Being always in the right was bad for my character and so I married and put myself always in the wrong. I watched my own nature changing from a detestable prig into a bearable and modest man."

Days went by and the fleet of motor cars did not arrive. The village children stopped haunting Shaw's Corner and Ayot fell back into its dull self, except at the week-ends when tall man and stout man, accountant and labourer gave a hand in keeping the village green and the abbey grounds sweet and tidy. Very important people no doubt passed through the village because I received a letter from a film star, world-famous as a blood-thirsty gangster, apologizing for looking over my garden hedge with the hope of seeing G.B.S. The maid, seeing him indulge his curiosity, told him to go and he 'went away as mildly as anything.' No doubt she expected him to shoot.

G.B.S. was obviously disappointed for he had much practical advice to give to the doughy fighter, especially about diet.

"I hear he eats quantities of meat. It is most unwise to train on a meat diet. I'm going to tell him that if he wants to survive as a pugilist he must give up meat and live a religious life. He may not go the whole hog but as the result of my advice he may cut down his meat consumption to half a pig a day."

When he had given up all hope and had settled down to the

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daily routine with very little to look forward to but a visit from a mere philosopher or scientist, Mr. Louis was announced.

"To my astonishment, I saw a man who was the very opposite of a pugilist. I thought they were playing a practical joke on my unsuspecting innocent person. He was a quiet man, a pink and not a black, who wanted to see me on behalf of a humanitarian organization. His name happened to be Mr. Lewis and he would never have gained entrance to my house but for the coincidence. He went away with the impression that I was the kindest and most agreeable of old people. He told me that he had walked all the way from the station, a thing no pugilist would ever think of doing. It requires something more than physical stamina to walk six miles: it requires a mind."

With the remark, "I do not give Joe Louis long," he dismissed him from his mind and told me of his friend Gene Tunney.

"When we were at Brioni in the Adriatic, Mrs. Tunney fell ill, dangerously ill, and her husband prayed for divine aid. The miracle happened. A great German surgeon appeared upon the scene and saved her life. The miracle was not that a surgeon appeared upon the scene but that a doctor could save a life. No such miracle would ever happen to me."

"Your whole life has been a miracle," I said.

"So you think, Inca. I see nothing miraculous in it. It has been hard work and very little satisfaction. It did me no good whatever to succeed. The people who pay homage to my success do not know how ashamed they make me feel. There is one part I have never been able to play and that is the successful man. I remember once asking a mother what it felt like to be one. 'I don't feel a mother at all, even with my child at my breast, but I know when the boy grows up, he'll demand that I behave like a mother: I'll have to personify his conception of a mother. It's a part I'll never be able to play.' People accept all that a successful person does for them as a matter of right. If I swerve an inch from the Shaw of their own making they say 'Give us the money back. We've been had.'"

"The miracle is not in your success. That's an accident," I said.

"I meant nothing of the kind. No person likes to fail in what he does. The days of the Bohemian are over. Success is sterile:

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it is like a contraceptive: it permits the consummation but withholds the child. I always wanted the child and it never came. I am talking in parables."

"I understand you perfectly," I said.

But he went on explaining.

"I had the devil of a childhood, rich only in dreams, frightful and loveless in realities. All my life I wanted to grip the essential poetry of living and it has always eluded me, in fact I wanted to be a Shakespeare and I became a Shaw."

## *Chapter Thirty-One*

I FELT that time hung heavily on his stooping shoulders. It was an interval between two creative periods and everything seemed to go wrong. If he wanted a book he couldn't find it, if we lent him something it was immediately lost. . . . in fact he needed a change and that was the thing he hated most of all. He had settled as a tree, not too deeply rooted in Ayot, it is true, but too dangerous to be uprooted.

Again we heard him going round his garden, banging his stick violently against the patient trees. He did not sing and he was disinclined to walk.

"Why don't you take up chess, G.B.S.? You would enjoy it."

"I don't want to enjoy anything. It is enough for the world that it has me to enjoy."

"We can both try. Do it for my sake, G.B.S."

"Why should I do anything for your sake?"

"I feel depressed and I want a change," I said.

"You mean that you want to kill time. An old man finds time too precious, the little he has of it. I've got far too much to do."

My approach was obviously the wrong one. Diplomacy was never a strong point in my character.

"I can never see more than one move ahead. In my plays I never knew what was going to happen to my characters until they themselves moved. I only had to sit and watch and report their moves. In chess I would always be beaten by an opponent who sees six moves ahead. Anyhow, I don't like competitive games: my sympathy is always with the loser."

"Except in boxing."

"There my interest is purely scientific: I have no sympathy with either party. I hate the sight of blood."

I gave up the plea. Any direct approach always failed. A diplomat would have made the idea appear to come from *him*.

"I have been dipping into Genesis, Inca. The best ideas are those which are ultimately proved to be false: God's Genesis,

## Shaw's Corner

Newton's Gravity, Darwin's Evolution and later, perhaps, Shaw's Life Force. The worst ideas are those which seem obviously true and explain so much that they explain nothing. I am hoping that among all my wearisome platitudes there might be something beyond the obvious. I've been nothing but a mental household drudge all my life: there are my ideas all brilliant and sparkling and the master and mistress arrive and quarrel and start breaking everything. One war after another. . . ."

He had to make a joke even of his depression:

"You didn't know the Charringtons, Inca? They married in a fit of love and quarrelled ever after. I once found him breaking up the china. 'Leave something for tomorrow,' I pleaded. 'There's not going to be a tomorrow, *you* can have Janet,' he shouted. Unfortunately there was a tomorrow and they went out happily on a shopping spree buying the loveliest pieces. They blamed *me* for destroying everything but I didn't mind as long as it kept them together."

His mood changed as miraculously as the sky after a storm. The blue of his eyes now shone with joy. The mention of certain people had that effect on him. When I told him that we had been with the Gilbert Murrays, it had the same effect, and when we described the Masfield visit, and our afternoon with Sir Sydney Cockerell. They were ever-present in his mind, disgustingly young but coming along nicely.

"Leaders of the Army of the Good but how are we to get hold of the bad and the indifferent? That's the problem of the day. We can go so far and no further with the people. I have written some of my best articles for the popular press. When I write for Fabians, I don't have to think because they take everything I say as gospel truth. But the common people are extremely critical because they reduce my polemics to tin tacks. If I plead for equality of income they say: 'Gawd, that old bloke wants us all to live on thirty bob a week. See 'im doin' it.' If I say that the community has the right to put a price on the right to live in it, they say: 'e's always boasting of 'aving sponged on 'is mother till 'e was too old to be naughty so 'e ought to be done away with first of all.'"

This was the first time G.B.S. showed such respect for *toute*

## Shaw's Corner

*le monde*. Perhaps he had had one or two letters which caused him to think hard about the critical mentality of the average person. I knew that he read such letters most carefully.

"I've never learnt how to talk to these people, that's what it is I'm on a different plane altogether. When a person begins to understand me, he thinks himself different from other people and he begins to swagger and pose and to say witty irresponsible remarks. You know how I loathe that kind of creature. I demand the right to exterminate such creatures."

"Has it occurred to you that if that is the effect of your work then there must be something fundamentally wrong with it?"

"My dear Inca, everything has occurred to me at one time or another. I do not dismiss the Bible because it has created a lot of religious fanatics. I do not dismiss the *Pilgrim's Progress* because it is read by dull dissenters. We are all creating types we are ashamed of: that's the tragedy of the creative artist. I am more dangerous than any sportsman when I pick up my pen. Whenever you see a person reading my work, you have my sanction to shoot her at once."

"Supposing you yourself had to do the exterminating?"

"The man who takes the road to Heaven not only takes his life in his hands but thousands of other lives as well. I'd see to it that it were done as humanely as possible so that even a Galsworthy would be satisfied."

G.B.S. enjoyed talking in this strain and felt all the better for it.

"When I became a naturalized Utopian," he continued, "I accepted all obligations. Here they are:

- (1) For years every spare evening of mine I spent on some squalid platform lecturing, lecturing, and lecturing. . . .
- (2) For years I lived in a squalid neighbourhood because I refused to prostitute my talent. . . .
- (3) For years I mixed with squalid people arguing, arguing, arguing. . . .
- (4) For years I dreamed dreams with no hope of seeing them realized. I might have finished up in a squalid prison. . . .

Failure was certain. Success was a sheer accident. I laughed in those days not because there was anything to laugh about but

because I had something to live for and that transfigured everything. Strangely enough I loved the sordid side of business, the play of economic motive fascinated me."

"The danger point for all Utopians," I said.

"All Utopians must pass through it. The way of the transgressor is soft compared with the transformer, or as I prefer to call him, the World Betterer," G.B.S. replied. "Don't forget I was brought up on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and it is still my bedside book."

"And you've never lost hope?"

"I've lost faith, hope and charity and found I could manage quite well without all three. I learnt to put up with what I've got and to go ahead as best I could."

"Your next book should be on *How to be a Utopian*."

"Utopians have to be cultivated very carefully and expensively. We spend fortunes on making young people ineffectual but not a penny on creating World Betterers. Utopians are not to be found in bushes, although they are often found in the queerest places: Moses in the bullrushes, Jesus in the manger and Shaw in Dublin."

I must have smiled, for he added: "We should have had Utopia already but for the Utopians. Aren't you going to let me see any more films at your place?"

"I was thinking of *Pygmalion*," I said.

"You've got a queer sense of humour, Inca. You enjoy hurting. Humour and torture are twin brothers. I wrote that pot-boiler to give Mrs. Patrick Campbell a little scale practice. There is nothing I loathe more than hearing scales: they set my dentures on edge."

"Would you like Dickens?"

"And spoil my child dream? The Dickens characters are more real to me than you. Why murder the last of my friends? I live intimately in my old age with the friends of my childhood."

"What about Danny Kaye?"

"I've never heard of him. Oh yes, isn't he the chap who talks like James Joyce on the music hall? One day they will try imitating me . . . if they can. I've got one or two ideas for films and could write the scenario but they would not be expensive enough



### *Shaw's Corner*

for the film magnates. Can't you think of a film that cost practically nothing to produce? A film without a star in it. Film beauties drive me to despair, especially when they insist on smearing their lipstick all over my face and showing me their nylon underwear."

I mentioned several films but not one appealed to him. He almost guessed what each was like from the most elementary description: often he completed the story, described the technique and told how he would have produced it, all with an amazing knowledge of the most modern developments.

"Why can't they make a film of the Fabians: the Webbs with their incorrigible spooning over their industrial investigations, the plain meals, the cycling, the Fabian Summer School (the marriage bureau for the abandoned intellectual)? There would be sex appeal in plenty and scandalous intrigue and the happiest of all endings: a scene in the House of Lords with all of them sporting crowns."

G.B.S. loved to be taken seriously when he was not serious but hated to be thought flippant when he was in deadly earnest. He was always explaining that Shawland was a practically unexplored volcanic region held to the mainland by the force of levity, and as yet only he could stand the climate which blew hot and cold capriciously and where you could only survive if you stood on your head.

He complained of his isolation and his difficulty in making himself understood even though his voice came echoing back from all sides. Here were hundreds, perhaps thousands of press cuttings; he had examined them all and put them back again in their neat bundles; the more his name was mentioned, the more his ideas were discussed, the more isolated he felt. His was a life of thought and his whole being yearned for action; that was the tragedy of old age. The boat never missed Shawland, the respect and the laughter were there but the boat waited and carried its passengers back into the world again.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

THE death of his previous housekeeper came as a great shock to G.B.S. Although he had had no communication from her since she left and had practically forgotten her, he at once decided on a worthy memorial. After his research in tombstones, he found no difficulty in framing suitable words. It was not necessary for him to go scavenging through the dustbins of literature to find a suitable epitaph. The first one that came to him was:

'They also serve who stand and wait'

but that was liable to misinterpretation and so he altered it to:

'No playwright was ever better served.'

He did not trouble to find out how Shakespeare or Ibsen were served.

"An epitaph is a wish fulfilment. If I had to compose an epitaph for Charlotte, I'd be stumped."

He worked out the memorial in greatest detail, examining the different stone used, the lettering and the shapes.

"I want a block of Irish green marble with a white marble inlay for the words, so that they stand out and can be seen at a glance."

He suggested the following inscription:

'BERNARD SHAW

Writer of many Plays.'

Here he stopped to ask if he was not pushing himself unduly.

"I'm not saying that I wrote good plays. I only put down my profession."

"Why not 'Playwright'?" I suggested.

"I thought of that but when I worked out the pattern on paper it looked more like a tombstone to me than to Mrs. Higgs. Anyhow, there is a colloquial lilt in 'Writer of Many Plays'. Playwright is too formal a word even though it saves seven letters. I'm not out for economy."

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There was certainly no economy in words; it read:

For many years they kept  
His house and garden  
At Ayot Saint Lawrence  
In the County of Hertfordshire  
Thereby setting him free to do  
The work he was fitted for.

He always regarded them as servants and not as human beings.

"I'm a bit worried about ending with a preposition. It will give the papers something to talk about," he said, examining the public effect of these simple words.

"Her work for Charlotte might be mentioned," I suggested. "She also set Charlotte free to do the work she was fitted for."

"My way of putting it makes Mrs. Higgs something of a celebrity. Anyhow, Charlotte hated the limelight and would never have permitted her name to be mentioned. By making my name prominent, attention will be called to the tombstone and a tombstone is there to be looked at. People will say: 'What's this about Bernard Shaw?' or 'Who was Bernard Shaw?' At first I thought of putting in Shaw's Corner: 'For many years they kept his house and garden at Shaw's Corner, Ayot St. Lawrence.' But that might be overdoing it."

It seemed to us that he was happier with this little composition than with the lengthiest of his plays. It was a novel experience for him to design a tombstone and he revelled in doing something practical at last. Even when we went to Cornwall for a few weeks, we had daily reports from him. He wrote to say that the local Michelangelo could not obtain the stone without a long wait and begged of us to use our influence or the tomb would be held up indefinitely. In one letter G.B.S. modestly confessed to 'knowing nothing technically about masonry and am reading every book on the subject. Soon what I do not know about tombstones will be the only thing worth knowing.'

In another letter he told us that 'the deceased lady's husband only demanded an urn and his wife's name in full and a little

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space for himself. Who said that Shaw's Corner lacked romance?'

Then the tone changed. It occurred to G.B.S. that we had given Ayot the slip for ever. He wrote:

"If you move to Lelant I shall have nobody I can talk to. I can only hope you will not find a house. Soon you will have to design *my* tombstone for Westminster Abbey."

In another letter he told us that he was entertaining the people who were living in our house, especially the babe or rather 'the six-months-old baby entertained me by its ceaseless and desperate efforts to understand all the strange things that were making pictures on its retinas which it could not quite co-ordinate.' Then he apologized for the shocks he had given us:

"You cannot deal with me that way, whatever shocks I have given you. I have had plenty myself. It is part of your Shavian education."

Again he returned to the tombstone:

"The Michelangelo says that letters cut deeply into Portland Stone last hundreds of years. And he evidently does not visualize my notion of a great block of granite, sparkling with mitre, and the inscription inlaid on a slab of bright green slate. After all one only dies once."

When we returned we found G.B.S. awaiting us.

"It is amazing," he said. "how one can travel the world with all its beauties and be glad to come back to a simple little village which has nothing whatever to show."

We thought that G.B.S. looked extremely well and said so.

"I feel nearer to two thousand than a hundred. I almost went out for a duck the other day. I was walking down the lane thinking I was alone when a duck, heedless of my presence, came waddling in front of me. I fell, it flew, and but for the knowledge that I was on solid ground, I managed to get back ultimately. I think I must have become invisible to birds and animals."

## *Shaw's Corner*

Apart from G.B.S., everything in the village looked tired and remote and the children lost in a wilderness.

"I have made one or two very important sociological discoveries:

- (1) Instead of dogs there are children everywhere.
- (2) It's the women who are smoking all the time instead of the men.
- (3) There are plenty of pretty young ladies about but no young unmarried men.
- (4) That the young mothers here must be dying of ennui.

That's enough to go on with. What can we do about it?"

I asked G.B.S. what he suggested.

"We must import eligible young bachelors," he replied, "by making the countryside attractive to the young. And the only way of making the countryside attractive to the young is to turn all the old fogies out of it. The young will not go where there are old people. Old people remind the young of decay and there is an aura of old age in this village. It gets the best of *me* sometimes. When I see old people walking here I feel quite sorry for myself."

"This is not a world for old people," I said.

"And it is not a world for young people, in fact, it isn't a world for any people, especially thinking people. No thinking person can feel of this world; he knows that he is a trespasser with no visible means of support."

"Is that how you have always felt?" I asked.

"I have felt different things at different times. The will to live has never been strong in me. The will to create, yes. Creation and living are entirely different things. The act of creation is an act of faith but mere living is negation. God has no use for the clodhopper and takes no count of him."

G.B.S. liked to assume this role of the man without pity.

"Why do you talk like this, G.B.S., when you have devoted your life ungrudgingly to the service of the clodhoppers?" I asked.

"The only thing to do when one hates a person is to serve

## Shaw's Corner

him," G.B.S. replied. "Parents hate children but they serve them. I went into one of the cottages for the first time when you were away and for want of something to say, I remarked on how nice the place was kept with the flower all out and blooming. 'You mean, Mr. Bernard Shaw, with the blooming children all out,' was her reply. 'I can't stand the sight of them and yet I wouldn't do without them.'"

We had a visit from a Professor of Eugenics who had been visiting a mental hospital not very far away and he told us that a mother had deposited there a child who moved about only on its head. It was certainly the most backward child he had ever come across in a life devoted to the helpless and the backward. At no point would he contemplate the thought of doing away with such creatures.

When G.B.S. came in and heard the story he remarked:  
"Then you have seen the highest and lowest in one day."

And he told us of how actors and actresses forgot their complaints and ailments once they were on the stage. "If the world is a stage, as Shakespeare contends, then how is it we can't all forget our physical imperfections? It is because we are so anxious to be our puny selves instead of playing other roles. I have always played a part and that is why I am what I am. I acquire a new self every year like a new suit of clothes," G.B.S. declared emphatically. "As a matter of fact, I've had this suit for over forty years. The suit is in perfect condition but the body inside the clothes is wearing out because I don't know how to play the role of an old man."

It seemed to us that he was the youngest of us all and was playing the role of an old man very badly, for having been cursed with perpetual youth, he did not know what old age meant. The Strudbrugs, in *Gulliver's Travels*, found their faculties gone, but G.B.S. seemed to have increased his sensibilities with increasing years. This was one of his good days. Soon G.B.S. was lecturing professor and ourselves on the spiritual basis of life.

"If life is to go on, it must be continually ashamed of its past and be constantly reaching forward. Man must live even if his reason teaches him to die. That is the universal postulate. Once a person discovers that he has a part to play, he'll want to live."

### *Shaw's Corner*

"Yours was an age of faith," I started saying.

G.B.S. looked at me with eyes of incredulous wonder.

"Have you gone mad, Inca? Mine an age of faith! The only people who took religion seriously were the atheists. They wanted to appoint me their Pope but I was no good at Alexandrine couplets. Civilization has got to go back to honest reality. Now that we have no illusions about human nature, we can go forward, knowing that we are on solid ground."

He liked to think that he was the only one in the world who walked on solid ground.

"Like the bee that walked over my face," G.B.S. said. "It had no terror for me even though it could sting. I like to be perfectly still and show no fear when a bee alights on a sensitive part. That's how the world behaves when I alight on it."

He took me round the house to show me the state of the walls and I was horrified.

"I left jll this to Charlotte and, of course, she never did anything. Her room is the worst of the lot. You know how helpless I am when it comes to doing something for myself. It's much easier tackling the world than a room or two. I thought of hanging a painting over the soiled parts but a good painting only makes the wall look worse. Besides, it is a much more expensive way of covering a space."

He asked me what builders charge nowadays as we had had our own house done and he liked it.

"Do you know of a decent cave round here which I can share with a few four-footed friends? The government needs all my money to pay for the next war."

## *Chapter Thirty-Three*

G.B.S. wanted to see what had happened to Lamer Park. He had heard that the Christ was left behind and was lying on its face in the grounds. I had already told G.B.S. that I had been there quite often and had never come across Epstein's Christ lying about. But he insisted on seeing for himself because the news came to him from 'a most reliable source'.

"I understand Christ is in store," I informed him.

"Why don't they place him in the demolished abbey? It would draw the whole world, instead of Ayot being a mere name."

"Why don't you suggest it?"

"Then they'd make me pay for it."

We walked along the fast disappearing overgrown right-of-way, known only to a few local people, and as we entered the hushed spinney, a lady approached us and asked a question before we could avoid her.

"Don't you think, Mr. Shaw, that the atom bomb will mean the end of civilization?"

"What has civilization to do with me? I live at Ayot Saint Lawrence," G.B.S. replied.

"How would you describe the age in which we are living, Mr. Shaw?"

"The paper age. The gods of today are paper gods created by the newspapers. I know because I am one of the creations."

The lady, humourless and unperturbed, rattled off more questions in a monotone and G.B.S. stood fascinated.

"I find myself extremely amusing and could laugh all day at myself," he said, throwing her a parting kiss.

We had to climb over fallen trees and the agility of G.B.S. amazed me. He climbed under the barbed-wire fence as one born to it. When at last we reached the neglected Adam house we circled the grounds and found no trace of the sculpture. We walked back by the easier lane.



## *Shaw's Corner*

"You should have lived in such a house," I said.

"I know. You are like the rest of them, Inca. You at once think of a suitable stage setting for me. You want me to be dwarfed by my own greatness. A writer needs a table, a writing pad and a bunk to rest on. You don't want me to flaunt my wealth, do you?"

"The house you live in doesn't represent you," I said.

"You mean that if I were gone from the place, none would feel that I had ever lived in it? Is that important? I always wanted to leave my imprint on the world and not on a village. My pen, my writing paper, my furniture can be bought in any shop: they cannot represent me. I have been to the homes of many a great man but I couldn't tell you anything about their furniture or their trappings. We talked, or rather I talked, and I have even forgotten what I said . . . and I cannot recall their names."

In the evening he told me that he had been visited by an ex-Cabinet Minister and before the war the richest country gentleman in England, or thereabouts.

"We compared notes and found ourselves in the same position. The surtax leaves him just enough to live on and meet his engagements with a car thirty-years old, living as plainly as the village innkeeper, comfortable enough but without a penny to spare. Just like me. We do not complain: this is just as it should be."

This mood gave way to hilarity when he read to me the draft of a marionette play he was writing. He read it in his loudest voice:

"Shakespeare: ' . . . Hither I come  
An infamous imposter to chastise,  
Who in an ecstasy of self-conceit  
Dares pretend here to incarnate my very  
self.'"

Shaw: 'And who are you? Know you not  
These features pictured throughout  
The globe? I am the famous G.B.S.'"

He laughed aloud as he corrected the lines.

### *Shaw's Corner*

This was in anticipation of the Malvern Festival. The play which had occupied him was to be shown but he would not see it.

"They want me to come but I told them any old man in a white beard would do as long as he was fast asleep in his box."

He recalled his long solitary walks on the Malvern Heights, his many visits to the cathedrals within easy reach and afternoons spent with Elgar.

"I was only eighty or so then, a youngster. I must write twenty or thirty new plays to keep the Malvern Festival going."

We talked about the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre and G.B.S. thought that Shakespeare had a great advantage over him in being Tudor. "Everything Tudor appeals to the American. They see nothing in things Victorian. Who would ever go into a place called 'The Victorian Tea Rooms' or the 'Victorian Art Gallery'?"

"Perhaps they will in five hundred years time."

"In five hundred years time the stage will go the way of the stage-coach: men will have lost their power of speech as they have already lost the ability to walk. They have always gone together. The faster the travel, the less time for talk. We Fabians talked as we walked and our talking survived the bicycle. The train and the car brought the strong silent man into existence and the aeroplane the weak neurotic one. What atomic power will bring I daren't say: we'll probably be able to read each other's blank minds."

"Then why bother about a phonetic alphabet?"

"So that the entomologists of the future will not conclude that the human being was the most senseless of all the insects."

## *Chapter Thirty-Four*

WE were presenting a gate designed by my wife for the demolished abbey. It was now complete. On Palm Sunday, before a gathering of the village, it was unveiled. G.B.S. made a point of being present, even though it interfered with his afternoon nap. He was the first to arrive on the scene.

It was a sweet and sunny afternoon and the gathering reminded him of the meetings of long ago in the London parks, but here there were no competitive orators except the rooks, who were wondering noisily what we were up to.

Mr. Francis Wayne, Chairman of the Parish Meeting, receiving the gate on behalf of the village, said: "This is one of the occasions, rare in village life, that rumour had understated the truth. It is fitting that a thing of beauty should be placed in the very centre of a village that is already beautiful and at the entrance to the churchyard which has been a hallowed spot for many generations."

The village did indeed look beautiful as he spoke, unearthly and one of the few unchanged places in England. Shakespeare himself might have come riding down and felt perfectly at home in the setting. If he did, he would have seen G.B.S. take off his hat and for the first time for over twenty years address the gathering in a clear resonant voice, not in ecstasy of self-conceit but in all humility. Here, in the radiance of the peaceful green, he declared his faith:

"Forty years ago, when I came to this village, it was still back in the fourteenth century, the modern world had passed it by. My coming did not interfere with it. The people in the fourteenth century knew God and being domestically minded had to give God a home and a habitation. And so they built a church on this spot. This abbey was built by loving hands, masons, to the glory of God and therefore to the glory of man. While on this point I must ask you not to call this House of God a ruined church, it is a demolished abbey. What happened was this:

### *Shaw's Corner*

centuries later, the Lord of the Manor, who was a widely travelled man, he had been to London, and had seen churches built in the modern style, he had seen churches built by Sir Christopher Wren, well, this pious well-intentioned man, thought the abbey was out of date, and so decided on demolishing it. This demolition was an act of piety, or as we would say nowadays, an aesthetic gesture. Then he proceeded to put up in the meadows yonder a classic church in the modern manner. Fortunately the Bishop had an eye for beauty as well as property and prevented the complete destruction of the abbey. Let nobody say that it is a ruin due to neglect. It is still the House of God. There are no stained glass windows, in fact, there are no windows, there is no vaulted roof, in fact there is no roof. It is exposed to wind and rain but it is still our House of God.

"It is most fitting therefore that on this day we, the parishioners of this old village should be gathered here on the green to place a gate which will open to the abbey. On Palm Sunday when all of us will be singing:

'Lift up your heads, O ye gates  
And be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors  
And the King of Glory shall come in.'

It is fitting I repeat that this beautiful gate shall be added, not as a barrier, but as an invitation. It is in keeping with the spirit of the abbey.

"This is His way, that is His House, and this is His Gate. Come, let us all pass through the gate."

## *Chapter Thirty-Five*

IT was only natural that many people who found G.B.S. Unapproachable should make an effort to call on us at the time they thought he might be coming. We had not learnt the art of saying 'No' and G.B.S. did not mind in the least if there were other people as well as ourselves to welcome him. He took them as he found them and felt called upon to entertain them. However much he repeated himself, we enjoyed hearing the old stories, word for word, the same inflexion, the same gestures and when, through a lapse in memory, a sequence failed him, a prompting from us was sufficient to set the stream flowing. Often he would repeat a statement verbatim from a book, giving the impression that he knew all his books by heart. If he was quoting what a character said, he acted the character, man or woman, old or young and he never seemed to tire. When what seemed a new incident cropped up, he always proved that he had foreseen it and had actually referred to it in one of his books. Nothing ever surprised him and nothing ceased to interest him.

When Danny Kaye came down to our place, I took him for a walk round the village and proved to him conclusively that we were off the map, for not a soul recognized him. We were having tea under the apple trees when the side gate opened and in came G.B.S., leaning on his stick, but alert.

Danny Kaye stood shyly and realized that G.B.S. also did not know who he was. It was a new experience for the comedian.

"My name is Bernard Shaw," G.B.S. said modestly.

"Danny Kaye."

"I have seen your name in the papers."

"So I have seen yours," Danny Kaye said in exactly the same tone.

"How long are you staying?" G.B.S. asked.

"As long as they can take me. I do a little turn at the Palladium. I am a busker."

"They still take me, and I am ninety-three."

## *Shaw's Corner*

G.B.S., like a true conjuror, took out his bag of tricks and entertained us with his patter, recitation from Shakespeare and song, while Danny Kaye sat open-eyed listening. Then came the examination:

"Have the music halls changed much? They say of me that I am the ideal playwright for those who dislike plays. You must be the ideal turn for those who have grown tired of music halls."

Danny Kaye was on his own ground; he leaned back and told us that his main effort was to eliminate the iron curtain which divided star from starrer.

"I entertain them for something like an hour," Danny Kaye said. "When I am tired, I lie down on the stage, make myself comfortable, ask for a cigarette, then for a match, and talk about things in general: sometimes politics, sometimes things that happened to me during the day. Tonight I'll talk about the peaceful countryside here. I don't prepare any programme. Each audience determines that by the kind of response. I am all wound up when I come on the stage and as I unwind, I give and give, till I can give no more. And when I am off the stage, oh, I feel so tired and yet I want to go on and on. I could not possibly sleep for hours, I am so worked up. Perhaps you know what I mean."

The nonagenarian's eyes twinkled with pleasure at the enthusiastic youth. Paternally, he cast a glance back to when he himself was a young man. To us it was long ago, but to him it was only like yesterday.

"I write plays," he said. "When I started, I was told that any speech longer than a few lines would soon empty the theatre. But my street corner experience taught me that when you talk for an hour, you begin to mark a little restlessness in the audience, but if you stick it out, the audience seems to get a second wind and then you can go on for an hour or two without much difficulty. I don't say that any person can do it, but I have learnt the art of being long-winded. . . ."

"I have done it for ninety minutes on end," Danny Kaye informed him.

"Oh, have you?" G.B.S. lifted his glasses and really became interested.

## *Shaw's Corner*

"Yes," Danny Kaye answered modestly. "I suppose they must find something in me if they keep on coming. I give them a good laugh and I give them a good cry and sometimes a good sleep. There was one man who was asleep in the second row of the stalls and as he didn't pay all that amount just to have a snooze, I stopped my show and took the audience into my confidence, and softly tiptoed, in ballet manner, for I started my professional career as a dancer, and whispered in his ear: 'Wake up, wake up!' The man woke up, and thanked me, taking me for the theatre attendant doing his normal duty during my turn."

"What would you say is the secret of your success?" G.B.S. asked.

"How do I know?" Danny Kaye answered.

"It is hard work exploiting something you don't know. Nobody has ever explained or succeeded in copying my comedic sense. What it is exactly I don't know and you don't know."

"I'm different from you, Mr. Shaw, I need the presence of an audience to invoke it."

"Your type of acting is of no use to people like myself, who have to make ends meet by writing. You take the bread out of our mouths by writing your own scripts, the spontaneous scripts which you work up so very deliberately. I want you to explain how it is that, once an actor gets before the footlights, to play a part, he forgets his own physical disabilities and can do wonderful feats of strength. A cripple can stride and fence. . . ."

"That is so true," Danny Kaye answered.

Time was flying; G.B.S. had letters to write and Danny Kaye had a huge audience awaiting him. The latter little knew that soon he would have to prove the truth of the statement which he found so true. On the way back his car collided with another, bruising his ribs. Danny Kaye went on with his show and over a painful cigarette told his audience all about his ribs.

Within a short time G.B.S. was to meet another group in our garden. My daughter, Theodora, the designer of the stage sets for his new play, asked the actors and producer to come down to Ayot for a little conference regarding the play.

"What about a little informal rehearsal for the benefit of G.B.S.?" the producer suggested.

## Shaw's Corner

"It is like Shakespeare suddenly appearing at the rehearsal of *Hamlet*," one of the actors suggested.

The actress protested: "I can't play just like this, I need footlights."

G.B.S. came in, sipped his apple juice, munched a sandwich and remarked: "To an old man all things taste alike. That is one of the thousand things an old man has to put up with. If any of you seem like reaching old age, try and avoid it by all means. We have not yet learnt how to grow old."

While the players took up their positions, G.B.S. became aware of what was happening. He said: "When a playwright finishes the writing of a play he does not want to read or see it again. He starts a new one straight away. Still, as this is probably the last occasion I can be of use to anybody, I don't mind. But do not presume on my generosity."

G.B.S. helped without stint; he was old-fashioned enough to insist on clarity of diction, and in his fine musical voice set the pitch and rhythm of each sentence. Above all he would not permit any stage business to interfere with the words themselves.

"Let the words do their own work. Don't be afraid of being static. I am not leading up to a murder but a thought. It is the thought first and foremost with me. And don't play for a laugh. The laughter will come as the wind comes. I am not entirely lacking in comedic sense."

Again and again he explained his ideas.

"I am playing Orinthia in your *Apple Cart*," a visitor said. "May I ask you a most intimate question?"

"I am always being asked most intimate questions. I am the grandfather-confessor of the whole world. You should see my correspondence. It doesn't matter in the least whether King Magnus and Orinthia slept together."

"Do you mean that you don't care what your characters do off stage? If they are alive they go on living away from the applause and the footlights."

"I don't know all their secrets. No good playwright knows all the secrets of his characters and I know least of all."

"They're based on your own life, aren't they?"

"Judging from my own relationship with women, I am



## Shaw's Corner

prepared to say it was a platonic relationship, but like fingerprints all love affairs are different."

"But you planned the play and know exactly what happened?"

G.B.S. was getting a little tired of this cross-examination. "Plays that do not write themselves unplanned are outside my practice."

This was the first Malvern Festival we had attended. We preferred spending the holiday season away from people and the superlative descriptions from Hugh Walpole and others did not tempt us there.

G.B.S. was there when we set off by car and he gave us a final bit of advice: "Leave the old play and go to the cathedrals. You mustn't miss them. They'll be standing when all my plays are forgotten."

The drive was a joyous one: Oxford was always inspiring, its literature in stone was as great as the best Shakespeare, the Cotswolds were poetry, and the Vale of Evesham the gentlest prose. We arrived just in time for the first performance of *Buoyant Billions* and we were sorry that G.B.S. was not there to see the hushed and expectant audience.

I personally enjoyed every second of the play but then it had a different meaning to me than to the other eager eyes and ears. I wanted it to succeed for his sake but I knew in advance that the ghost of old age was haunting the minds of the critics. It is true that G.B.S. could not run so fast down a decline as up an incline, but the very slowness of the movement appealed to me. The Conversation Piece between father and son on the new profession which was as old as the hills, the profession engaged in by the great world-betterers which never yielded a penny; the conversation in the next act on Eastern and Western religion and culture; the scene in an Eastern temple set in a Mayfair drawing room where every aspect of love and marriage was discussed; and the final act, which was added to bring graciousness and dignity to the play, where Bill Buoyant himself comes upon the scene, all moved me deeply.

I know that Conversation Pieces are difficult to put on the stage: people want action, they want suspense, but surely we've

reached the stage when we can also listen to deep and witty converse. Or are we only interested in conversation when we ourselves take part?

The audience listened and were delighted and when the play was over, knowing that G.B.S. was waiting for my report, I sent him a wire that it went well.

I suppose that a Festival attracts the worshippers only. Everywhere we went it was Shaw, Shaw, Shaw. Memories of his presence there, memories of his quips and escapades. In that way it was different from the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. How will it be when the last of Shaw's cronies have gone and there will be none to recall his living presence?

We sat in the lovely gardens adjacent to the theatre and sipped coffee. The great ones were pointed out to us: they didn't look great but the day of appearances has gone. The supermen and world-betterers G.B.S. had contemplated had not yet found appropriate bodies in which to appear.

I sat in the quiet of his room and told him how each bit was interpreted and on the whole he was well pleased and was even willing that it should go to London. I begged of him to insist on a small intimate theatre but unfortunately one of the largest theatres was taken and the loss was so great that it had to be taken off. I knew from his conversation that he took his defeat very badly.

"I make most of my money from the Repertory Theatres and they won't touch it, you'll see, because it has flopped. They only do West End successes."

His reputation did not suffer in the least through the collapse of the play. He settled down to write another.

"I feel towards *Buoyant Billions* as to my alphabet, the more it is condemned the more I cling to it." He had a copy of the *Lancet* by him and he showed me a paragraph he had carefully marked about a new operation.

"Don't you think I might offer myself as a guinea pig to these people? A frontal leucotomy might stop my itch to write. I might become the contented uncritical good-for-nothing destined to inherit the earth. If a whole race and a great race was prepared to permit circumcision, then why shouldn't we make

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a frontal leucotomy universal if the operation on me proves successful? I'm writing tonight."

"I think it would be more useful to homicidal maniacs," I suggested.

"Perhaps you are right: the operation is meant for politicians. It's too late to alter the letter but I might hold the suggestion in reserve or send it to *The Times*. Was it you who suggested I might leave my old body to the Royal College of Surgeons?"

I awaited his prepared response.

"I thought of adding it in a codicil but they would be insulted and my respect for the medical profession is too great for me to tread on their cherished corns. How would you feel if I left you an old discarded car?"

"There was a lot to be learnt from the enemy aeroplanes that were brought down," I said in the same strain.

"Certainly, Inca. It helped terrifically in the building of a better plane. They can have me if it will help them to build a better Shaw. It will want some doing. It took me a whole lifetime to do it. And I cannot say that I have succeeded. The next Shaw is due in about five hundred years time. Between then and now, vacuum."

## *Chapter Thirty-Six*

HE sat under the willow tree and eyed us sadly. "Do you know what I've heard? I've just heard from a reliable source that your lease expires and that it will not be renewed. The village will seem unfurnished."

We had already heard to that effect but had kept the information from him.

"Death is now knocking at my door and a very welcome guest he is," G.B.S. said.

The telephone bell rang and there was an urgent request from Shaw's Corner. Could we keep Bernard Shaw at all costs until we were advised it was safe for him to go home? We saw visions of a hold-up by highwaymen, for our little corner of the world was once the haunt of Dick Turpin as well as many a monk.

G.B.S. explained: "A woman has landed outside my gate with all her trunks and belongings."

Later there was another urgent call: "She refuses to go."

"I must drive her away. I am an expert in that kind of thing," G.B.S. declared.

But we got talking again about our own predicament and evening was falling before he got up to go.

At his gate sat a frail girl in the twenties and beside her were a number of cases and trunks all neatly stacked. Who was she? Was she one of the army of women who believed that G.B.S. was the only man in the world who could understand their woes? Probably she had caught him once in an unguarded moment and had received a very friendly reply and this was interpreted to mean that he was deeply interested in her. Women of all types and from all classes wrote to him and he had not yet composed a special printed postcard to cover all their desires.

She stood up and held out her hand expecting a warm handshake from the man of her dreams.

"Who are you? What do you want?" G.B.S. shrieked for the whole village to hear.

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"You know who I am."

"I don't know who you are and don't want to know. Go away, go away."

"I have nowhere to go to."

"It has nothing to do with me. I am not your keeper. I am sending for the police."

The lady shrank with horror.

"You have no soul," she said helplessly.

"Then why do you want to guard something I haven't got?"

He walked away swinging his stick, mouthing his retort. This was obviously just another story for him to add to his repertoire.

When he came again we did not refer to the incident and he had other things to think about.

"Are you going to the Parish Meeting?" he asked.

A Parish Meeting was going to discuss the possibility of a bus once a week to take the people out of themselves. Only four miles away as the crow flies, lucky crow, there was a most modern garden city with a tremendous emporium and houses which competed in every modern device.

And the other item on the Agenda was a water tower for Ayot St. Lawrence so that the cottages could have running water at last. It was a pity that G.B.S. could not appear in person for he would have found material for a play entitled *The Water Cart*. However, he did the next best thing and sent a long letter giving his considered advice. It contained the following suggestions:

- "(a) The proposed Water Tower must be made a thing of beauty and placed in the centre of the village. There can be no greater mistake than to imagine that a water tower need be a disfigurement to be hidden as far away as possible. On the contrary it is a golden opportunity to add to the picturesqueness of the village. A well-designed water tower can be as great an ornament as a campanile and when I am gone it will attract people to the village.
- (b) A straight road should be cut through the fields because the winding lanes, however pretty, are a nuisance and a great waste of time.

- (c) All old cottages which disfigure the landscape should be demolished forthwith and prefab dwellings put up in their stead."

The Parish Meeting was reminiscent of old Athenian days when all could come and speak. This meeting should have been held beneath the Doric columns of the Classic church where orators standing on the spacious steps could utter their cry for water in measured cadence. Momentous decisions were to be made; the village hall had never known such tension and suspense. Two important officials of the Rural District Council had come and had placed imposing plans on the table for all to see! Each person played ball with the ugly water tower, pitching the clumsy thing from one spot to another, none wanting it within his own vision. When the letter from G.B.S. was read, the tension magically relaxed and there was loud laughter.

When I reported the meeting to G.B.S. he laughed and was back again in the old vestry days when he fought single-handed for women's lavatories and had to make them appear respectable by inducing his famous actress friends to use them. But as actresses were not considered respectable this ruse did not succeed.

He designed a water tower by sticking coloured paper to a cardboard base, more like a Moorish temple. There he sat on his couch by the window, panama on head to protect him from the sun, cutting his strips of paper and enjoying it like a child.

He meant to have that water tower at all costs and he examined old books of Eastern architecture that he had not looked at for years, he examined old Italian and Baroque designs but he did not dream of ordering any books on contemporary architecture.

"The modern stuff suffers from piles. I know when I had an attack I had to do all my work standing and I never appreciated a chair more than when I could sit down again."

At first I couldn't catch the connection but he was, of course, referring to those picturesque constructions on piles which were coming up all over the place. A friend of his was living in one of them and he naturally concluded that all contemporary architecture conformed to that pattern.

### *Shaw's Corner*

"I shouldn't mind living up in the water tower for the score of years left to me."

"A modern anchorite!"

"It's my only way of getting away from post and visitors. I'd see that none but you ever got up. Only I'm no good in the heights, I get giddy. I'd get used to it."

"Why didn't you put that argument before the Parish Meeting?" I asked.

"It only came to me afterwards. You mention it to one or two natives and see how they respond."

I am afraid I forgot to mention that point when the discussion cropped up at tea parties.

## *Chapter Thirty-Seven*

**A**WAY from Ayot St. Lawrence, we retained our contact by continuous correspondence: he reported happenings in the village and we kept him informed of our own doings. We managed occasionally to run down to Ayot and felt strangely relieved of sentiment towards it. I felt like a robin perched on a dead body. I happened to be engaged on a biography of a friend of his early days and it brought up memory after memory of many a happy occasion spent in the company of one who saw his merit when all others denied it. He lived those days again in his numerous letters to us, and I passed on to him the results of my research in a life so rich in endeavour and so poor in reward.

One day we received a post card which we could not understand. It stated simply:

“Erica is dead. Expired 23 February.”

We wondered who it could be. Perhaps the young lady who had come upon him with all her belongings had decided to end her life. Perhaps it was the cat that had graced the last few years of his life, perhaps, perhaps, perhaps—— We answered, expressing our sympathy but confessed to our ignorance of Erica. It was only natural for him to take for granted that after such an intimate association for so many years, when he told us everything, that a Christian name would at once bring up memories which we could share.

G.B.S. wrote back quite sentimentally for him:

“Is she so soon forgotten? She is now your neighbour, cremated in your town. G.B.S.”

We investigated at the Cremation office but no one of her name could be found. On hearing from us, he wrote:



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"I am all wrong again. I am writing to the person who informed me to say that there is no record of the cremation. I am excruciated with lumbago and being radio-heated in the the hospital. Dottyer than usual in consequence. G.B.S."

Again we investigated, for never, it seemed to us, had he taken the death of a friend so much to heart. We conveyed our sorrow.

We received by return a long letter and we were relieved. It was the old G.B.S. again.

"Sorrow be damned.

Erica lived on a farm and my recollection is that you visited her there and discussed her extraordinary character and habits with me with exceptional interest.

Forty or fifty years ago she imagined herself violently in love with me, and, being about one third quite mad, was a terror and a nuisance, as she would arrive at ten or eleven p.m. on a motor bicycle, and assume that my house was her own and I her husband. When we were driven to tell that if she did not go away we should have to call the police she either slept in the woods or planted herself on the nearest farmhouse. Yet she was an exquisite sort of person, and had literary talent, nullified by an aphasia which made it impossible for her to mention the nominative in a sentence; so that in her privately printed books I got so mixed up with Rupert Brooke that no one could tell which of us she was writing about in any sentence. At last she dropped out of my life; but I never quite got over the dread that she would turn up again; and her death is a relief, though it is at least forty years since I saw her last.

Does this recall nothing to you? Some friends surprised me lately by telling me that they had discovered her. I, being senile, was quite certain it must have been you, and am trying in vain to think who else it could possibly be. The person who wrote to me to say that Erica was dead gave no name. . . ."

When we went down to Shaw's Corner, G.B.S. at once told

us that we were talking to a dead man, that he had in fact died a night before.

"I had a freezing fit. I saw myself passing away and when I died at last, not able to move a limb or utter a sound, I was quite happy about it. What I dreaded was the fussing round my dead body."

He was extremely talkative and we ranged as always over every subject. He assured us that the atom bomb would never be used.

"Put that down as my last prophecy," he said emphatically.

He drew his chair right up to the electric fire but it did not yield the warmth he needed. He asked for his hands to be rubbed and smiled as joyfully as a child when it was done.

When we stood up at last to go, he urged us to stay a little longer, and we talked and laughed happily together.

We were depressed on our long drive home, feeling conscience-stricken that we had ever left Ayot St. Lawrence, for he had now completely surrendered to old age: he looked a lonely and forlorn figure in that black pinafore which he wore to prevent stains, and with the thin haggard face, the long bony hands and dry blue lips. He seemed to be driving with us along the narrow shadowy lanes and through Luton and Dunstable.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

I WAS walking to the Bodleian enjoying the morning sunshine when the writing on a poster attracted my attention:

‘Accident to Bernard Shaw.’

I bought the local paper, learnt of what had happened and within a few hours, my wife and I were at the hospital. We could not have imagined G.B.S. in a more alien atmosphere. Oscar Wilde at Reading could not have felt more unhappy. There he lay with that wonderful head of his held to a long thin body by a wisp of a neck. His first words were:

“This is my Hell.”

And he repeated the words until they died away in the sanitary silence of the walls. We assured him that he would be home soon but he dismissed this kind of talk with contempt. “I tell you I’m going to die here. What have I done to deserve this?”

The question was the very one his wife asked when she was in such suffering.

Of course, we did not stay long but drove down to London to get the dish he loved so much and saw the healing effect of it. He was obviously recovering his good spirits and on one occasion was well enough to ask my wife to read to him and he recalled her reading of Mascefield’s poem in his honour. And he had one or two suggestions to make about the biography of Henry Salt<sup>1</sup> I was writing. He was thinking a great deal about it and wondering what new facts I was digging up from the voluminous correspondence.

“How do I come out in all this?” he asked and one or two memories long buried in the unconscious, rose happily to the surface. “It’s a pity that your only reader is pegging out.”

It gratified me to know that he loved all that he had seen of it and he was thinking of the friend who meant so much to him when he first came over from Ireland.

We learnt how the accident happened. The day after we were

<sup>1</sup>*Salt and His Circle*, published 1951.

together he went for his usual walk to Saint Joan and lingered long there and then he followed the path to the orchard and into the house. It was now time to dress for dinner and as he ascended the stairs to the bedroom, he felt a desire to do a little pruning. If he wasn't beating trees he was always cutting them. Back he went along the path with the tool basket in hand and reached the first tree, which was sadly overgrown with leaf. He held a branch and in cutting fell back and on to the ground.

He rarely walked without carrying his camera and a whistle, which he was to blow if anything happened to him. The maid heard the whistle and then heard her name being called. She rushed out and saw him crawling towards the house, bravely and with much pain.

"My back is broken," he muttered. "I've broken my back."

He had fallen on the heavy camera he was carrying and had broken a bone.

The maid called for the local doctor and within a short while G.B.S. was transferred to the large building where he was to spend so many weeks.

His humour certainly did not fail him in the hospital.

"When I sleep, they open my eyes to see if I am awake; and when I am awake they tell me I should be asleep. And as to washing: they are always coming in to wash me. I have never felt so unclean in my life."

He was very happy to receive a book on art from Winston Churchill and one of the first things he did when he returned to his house and was safely installed in the dining room was to autograph a book and have it sent to Winston. Once in his home he got down to tin-tacks.

"Who is the nearest undertaker?" he asked. Trying hard to recall the name, he mentioned the name of the local tailor.

"That's a good sign. When you recover you'll have a new suit."

"Nonsense. You must make arrangements at once. I want the plainest coffin and you must have me cleared away without fuss as soon as I go. You don't want a dirty, smelly mess in the house."

### *Shaw's Corner*

There was a last-minute document to sign but his hand had to be guided.

Once or twice he was able to lie in the garden, for the weather was most kindly.

He fell into a coma and lay with his eyes wide open, recognizing nobody. The passing from life to death was slow and deliberate. He meant to die.

Even after death he had his little jokes: in the people who took possession of his body, in the strange gathering at the burning of it, in the huge crowds that made a laughing stock of the quiet of the village.

St. Joan alone stood there defiant, not heeding crowd or ceremonial. She had known G.B.S. to come every day and commune with her and now she had taken his ashes to herself.

THE END



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